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6

My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"The Six Things I Couldn't Say"



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“You’re amazing.”

“Irido-kun, guess what? I made a friend in class!”

Apparently, I had an ugly side. I hadn’t been aware of it, but I could no longer deny it—it was a part of me and my history.

“There was a girl reading a book during lunch, and I worked up the courage to start a conversation with her!”

I nodded along with a smile on my face, celebrating her growth. I wasn’t being dishonest—not in the slightest. How could I not have been happy when you were so joyfully grinning ear to ear? Still, why had a certain thought crossed my mind after I saw you happily chatting with your friend?

“Oh, you’re one of *them* now.”

After that, I’d put up a wall between the two of us. But it was something else that I’d said that pushed her—the one who was supposed to be on my side—over the edge.

“Sorry, Irido-kun! I made plans with a friend today...” she’d said.

I should’ve voiced my feelings right then and there. I’d already accepted my ugly side, my feelings of alienation, so I should’ve told her. Instead, I...

“Fine. Whatever.”

“Huh?”

I hadn’t even attempted to hide the venom in my words. I didn’t even say goodbye or turn my back on her. I didn’t sugarcoat my words. No, I chose to be confrontational. Talking about what I should’ve done is easy. However, the pile of things I should have done but didn’t is reality.

Mizuto Irido

“Okay, class, for today’s homeroom, we will be choosing members of the cultural festival committee,” our sleepy-looking homeroom teacher declared.

Despite being in charge of the class with the brightest first-year students, I never got a sense that our teacher was very motivated. Well, that was fine. Personally, I preferred my teacher on the hands-off side. It enabled me to work on my secret project without disruption.

“Those on the committee will mostly be the points of contact for the event managers as well as the voice of the class.”

I didn't really listen to the rest of his explanation because I had more important things to focus on. The cultural festival didn't interest me—I just wanted to finish the short story and show it to Higashira. I needed to get it done as soon as possible so I could prove to her that she was overevaluating me, and I was just a normal person.

I wasn't used to writing, so each day was a struggle. But it felt like I was starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel. My pen moved as if my eagerness was fueling it. Meanwhile, homeroom continued on without me.

"I think Yume-chan should do it!"

"Huh?! A-Akatsuki-san?!"

"She's a real straight shooter—and kind, to boot. Perfect for the job!"

"Good idea!"

"Agreed!"

Other people in the class began voicing their agreement.

"Huh?" Yume was obviously troubled.

Hm, would present tense work here? Or would past tense be better?

"Okay, then who's going to be her counterpart?" our teacher asked. "Preferably a guy."

"Me!"

"I'll do it!"

"You guys are so transparent..."

"Seriously, guys?"

"Where was this energy just a little bit ago?"

The tempo of this passage is kinda off. I wanna add a few words, but what...?

"How about Irido?"

"Her little brother?"

"Oh yeah, he won't have any ulterior motives. They're family, after all!"

"Good idea!"

"Irido-kun, huh?"

"Oh yeah! He's smart too!"

"And he's got a girlfriend, so there's nothing at all to worry about!"

"So the guy counterpart will be you, Irido! Okay?"

"All right... Huh?" I looked up and responded reflexively. By the time I did, my name had already been written on the blackboard.

"Hm?"

By the time I realized what'd happened, it was too late. They'd already moved on.

"Congrats, Yume-chan!" Minami-san said.

"Thanks...? I feel like I was kinda forced into it... I hope

everyone's okay with me."

"It's you we're talking about. Everyone's gonna listen!" one of her friends said, pumping her up.

"Exactly!" added another. "Especially the boys! You should really work 'em extra hard!"

Hm?!

"Good luck, Irido!" one of my classmates said.

"I'm not happy, but I'd prefer him to any other bastard who'd try to cozy up to her."

Hm?!?!?

"Moving on," our teacher said. "We need to decide on what this class is doing for the festival. Irido siblings, come up here and field ideas."

Hm?!?!?!?

Before I even had the time to process what had happened, I found myself standing at the podium in front of our thirty-plus classmates. In the midst, I saw Kogure Kawanami, who was wearing the most shit-eating grin I'd ever seen while giving me a thumbs-up for some reason. *Wait... You bastard!*

"What should we do?" Yume whispered. "Who should start talking?" *Is that a real question?!*

"All you," I said, taking a step back.

"Huh?!"

I decided to be the secretary. No doubt the class would prefer this as well. As I picked up the chalk, Yume flashed a resentful glare at me, before facing the class.

"U-Uh... Well, does anyone have any suggestions?"

"What should we do?"

"A haunted house is pretty standard."

"Ugh, sounds like a pain to prep for."

"What's something normal?"

"I don't wanna do the same thing as other classes."

"U-Uh... Um..." Yume stammered.

Though Yume had succeeded at her high school glow-up, she hadn't gotten better at being louder. Her small wisp of a voice had no chance of talking over the excited, unrestrained chatter of the class. *She's got it rough*, I thought as I proceeded to write "Ideas" on the board.

"Hey, everyone—" Minami-san said, speaking up after seeing Yume struggling, but right as she did...



I lightly tapped the blackboard, which reflexively gathered the attention of the class, shutting them up and giving me a second to signal Yume with my eyes.

“P-Please raise your hand if you have a suggestion.”

Thanks to that, everyone finally heard Yume. *What a troublesome honor student.* I sighed, trying to be covert, but apparently Kawanami and Minami noticed. The former whistled, impressed, while the latter looked astonished.

“Cosplay café!” Minami-san quickly raised her hand and blurted out.

Kawanami shook his head. “Listen, don’t you know tropes? That’s what the guys are supposed to say.”

“But I wanna see Yume in cosplay!”

After her comment, other people, mainly girls, in the class began chiming in with agreement. The guys were strangely quiet, perhaps because anything they might’ve said could be construed as sexual harassment. *A cosplay café is the standard thing to do.*

“U-Um... W-Would that be okay?” Yume immediately began looking at me for help.

Try a little harder, I thought before calling out to our homeroom teacher. “Are there any documents about what past classes did?”

“Uh-huh. There are.” He acted as if he’d been waiting for this, then pulled out some papers from the folder he’d been holding.

Couldn’t you have given them to us earlier if you had them this entire time? Then again, our school was just like this. They wouldn’t lift a finger if the students didn’t ask. Students were actively encouraged to be independent.

I began flipping through the pages. “It looks like they did a cosplay café last year, so the school should be okay with it.”

“So we can do it?” Yume asked.

“Yeah, but there’s still the chance that we’ll overlap with other classes. I’m not sure what’ll happen in that case,” I said, shooting our teacher a glance.

“Overlap is allowed, but only to a certain extent. If too many classes are doing the same thing, you’ll be asked to present your case to the organizers so that they can keep the excess to a minimum.”

“What criteria do they use to decide?”

“How ready you are for your activity and whether or not it conforms to our school’s moral guidelines. Oh, and of course they’ll look at how attractive it will be as an activity. At the end of the day, though, it’s all up to the organizing committee, which is comprised of the student council and the PTA.”

It was like speaking to an NPC with the way he was giving me just

the essentials. I took a quick moment to think.

“So, the biggest problem will be whether or not we can get cosplays. If we don’t have a good handle on that, our presentation might not help us get approved.”

“A presentation? I’m guessing the class committee representatives would have to do that?”

“Is there any restriction on who can present?” I asked our teacher.

“It can be anyone, as long as they’re a student in the respective class,” he answered immediately.

These kinds of questions were best asked directly.

“In that case, it’d be best to leave it to the experts. Why don’t we leave it to someone who’d be knowledgeable about it? Like, the person who suggested it?”

“The person who suggested it... Oh.” I put away the documents and left the rest to Yume. She turned to the rest of the class and began speaking. “Uh... I think we can do it as long as we can get costumes ready.”

“Yeah!”

“Akatsuki-san...”

“Yeah?”

“Since you’re the one who brought it up, could you fulfill that role?”

Minami-san grinned. “Sure! But...”

“Hm?” Yume tilted her head.

“You’re gonna be our model if we have to do a presentation, Yume-chan. After all, we’re gonna need a sample to show ’em, right?”

“Uh...”

The class exploded with cheers of approval. Yume once again shot me a look, asking for help, but I ignored her this time. *The more risqué cosplays will be filtered out, so there shouldn’t be a problem.*

“F-Fine, but *only* if we have to.”

I wrote “Cosplay Café” on the board and added an asterisk with the note, “If we can get costumes ready.” It was a kinda anti-climactic ending, but there weren’t any ideas that had gotten anywhere near as much excitement from our class.

Now that homeroom was over, Yume, now back in her seat, was surrounded by Minami-san and her friends.

“Phew, that was nerve-racking!”

“You were great, Yume-chan!”

“Yeah, you were real confident.”

“Totally! You were *peak* confidence! Be proud!”

“Thanks, you guys...” Yume said, smiling happily.

Amazing. She’d been flailing pretty much every step of the way,

but she was happily receiving praise. Thinking back, she'd been pretty confident when she'd been selected as the new student representative too. Maybe a leadership role suited her better than she thought. Maybe I hadn't ever thought of her that way because I'd come up with an image on my own...

"Good work, Irido!" Kawanami said insincerely to me as I sat back down. "You really had Irido-san's back up there. You're great at dealing with things even if you don't like interacting with other people. Everyone's super impressed."

"Cool."

"That's your only reaction? C'mon! Be happy!" I just sat there, unresponsive. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing..."

What was there to be happy about? If anything, now that it seemed like there were gonna be more annoying things to worry about, I was kinda ticked off. Thinking about this made me realize something once more.

"I'm thinking that... I really *am* different..."

Kawanami laughed. "Huh? It's a little late for you to be hitting your edgelord phase."

I said bye to Kawanami and left the classroom to go home since I couldn't go to the library just yet. Yume, who should have been headed for the same place, didn't come with me.

"I... I'm done," I muttered with a sense of accomplishment.

I looked at the papers on my desk, which were crammed full of the words I'd written. I'd finally completed my short story. It didn't hold a candle to professional writing, of course, but for a novice high schooler, this *had* to have been on the better side.

I had originally intended to write something average, but I'd gotten a little too into it and accidentally written something *above* average. But maybe this was for the best. It probably wouldn't have been a good idea to show her something that had been written poorly on purpose. But there was something I needed to do before I showed this to Higashira tomorrow.

"Technically, I *did* promise."

I hadn't forgotten that Yume and I had promised to read each other's stories. I had no obligation to stay true to my word, but this definitely beat being yelled at. She could at least help do some spell-checking for me...as long as *she* hadn't forgotten our agreement.

I walked out of my room with my short story. I didn't hear anything, so I figured she was downstairs. Sure enough, she was in the living room, and so were dad and Yuni-san. Yume was sitting on the couch, talking on the phone.

“Uh-huh. Huh?! Wow! Yeah. Uh...but we’re not the only ones who decide this, so let’s put a pin in it for now.” She seemed to be in the middle of a semi-serious conversation. “Yeah, let’s decide this at the next class meeting— Ah.” Yume noticed me and moved her phone away from her ear. “Good timing, Mizuto...-kun.” She shot a glance at our parents nearby as she quickly added an honorific. “I’m on the phone with Akatsuki-san—she says she might be able to get the costumes together.”

“Okay.”

“We’d be renting them, so it depends on how much of our budget it cuts into, but we’re thinking about making a final decision after we iron out exactly what kind of cosplay we’re doing in the next class meeting.”

“Oh...yeah. It would be easier to have some kind of theme picked out.”

“Right? What do you think would be good?”

“I thought you wanted to decide that with the class.”

“It’s better to lay the groundwork now so we don’t have to waste time having some stupid back-and-forth between everyone...or at least that’s what Akatsuki-san said.”

“Laying the groundwork now? Is she really a first-year?” She sounded more like a politician. I glanced at the papers in my hand and shifted gears.

“For starters, we should veto anything too risqué. There’s no way we’d get the okay to do them.”

“True... But how risqué are we talking about?”

“From what I’ve read in the documents, anything that involves a mini skirt is a bad idea. For example, if we did a maid café, they’d have to be Victorian-style outfits.”

“‘Victorian’...? I don’t really know what that is, but that sounds pretty strict.”

“Also, I mentioned maid cafés, but it’s highly possible that we’ll get complaints if only the girls are cosplaying. We should think of something that guys can dress up as too. But for the record, I completely reject the stupid trope of having guys cross-dress.”

“I had a feeling you’d say something like that. According to Akatsuki-san, most of the girls seem to want to stick to what’s standard. Everyone seems pretty serious about this.”

“Standard, huh? It’s hard to think of something that the PTA would be ok with, in that case.”

“Maids and butlers would be an idea, but also it might overlap with other classes.”

“Yeah, but won’t we run the risk of going over budget if we try to spice things up for the sake of not overlapping?”

“True...” Yume said pensively.

“Hm? Are you talking about a cultural festival by chance?” Dad inserted himself into our conversation from the dining table.

“They’re so young, talking about doing a cosplay café,” Yuni-san said while opening a snack across from him.

“W-We haven’t decided that’s what we’re doing yet. We need to make sure we can actually get the costumes...” Yume said, strangely waving her hands frantically.

“Oh,” dad said in a low voice. “In that case, maybe you should ask Madoka-chan for advice.”

“Huh? Madoka-san?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure she’s in her college’s theater club.”

“Really?” Yume shot me a glance after hearing this.

Don’t look at me. This is the first time I’m hearing about this. He was talking about my cousin, Madoka Tanesato. I would agree that she seemed like the type who would be involved with cultural festivals.

While I was thinking, Yuni-san tilted her head. “Huh? Wasn’t she in the art club?”

“Huh? Was she?” dad replied.

“Hm... I also feel like she said she was in the tennis club,” Yuni-san said with uncertainty.

I had no clue why it was so hard to remember what club she was actually in, but honestly, I would’ve believed she was in all of them.

Dad laughed. “Well, at the very least, she’s very well-connected. People warm up to her quickly. I’m sure she knows someone who can help you with costumes. I remember her mentioning she was on her school’s cultural festival committee. She could probably give you some tips too.”

“Madoka-chan goes to college in Kyoto, right? I bet she’d be happy to help. She’s probably bored since summer break hasn’t ended yet.”

I wasn’t sure how much we could trust the information we’d received, but I decided to reach out regardless.

“We’ll try doing that then. Akatsuki-san, did you hear that? Yeah, a well-connected family member of ours— Huh? Yeah, a girl. Chest size? U-Uh... I don’t think you want to know.”

“A well-connected family member of ours,” huh? I thought I’d gotten used to our new family environment, but I was still having trouble processing the fact that Yume was referring to Madoka-san like that despite not knowing her all that long.

That being said, that did it for this conversation. I assumed she was done with me, but I still needed her for something. I lightly gripped the pieces of paper in my hand.

“Huh?” Yume looked at me again. “Sorry, did you need

something?"

For some reason, I reflexively hid the papers behind my back. Yume had been the one to ask if she could read my story. I'd just been trying to fulfill my obligation. There shouldn't have been any reason to hesitate, but... Then again, our parents were here, and Yume... She was dealing with the whole cultural festival committee situation, which was new territory for her. It wasn't a good time.

"No. Nothing."

I didn't need her to read it now. She could read it after Higashira, simple as that.

I wasn't necessarily lonely, nor was I feeling abandoned. I couldn't find the right words to describe what I was feeling, which was ridiculous because regardless of its quality, I'd *just* finished writing my short story. In the meantime, an annoying sense of loathing welled up inside. *No, stop. Stop. Stop.* I wasn't a kid throwing a tantrum when something didn't go my way. I should've grown past this. I was supposed to have left who I was behind in middle school when we broke up. I absolutely would not accept this part of me.

If this part of me was a full-blown character in a book, there was no way in hell I'd read it. I'd felt like this before—hating myself for my jealousy. Hating myself for how hostile I got. That's why in order to deny this part of me and to emphasize that I wasn't that kind of person, I bowed my head to Yume.

After I apologized, you threw a fit about me cheating. In that moment, I had been the exact person that I hated. I was so annoyed, but also...relieved.

"I really can't get on Higashira's case..."

Maybe it was a basic human desire to want others to be like you. I sat up in my bed, worried that I'd fall asleep. I'd rather take a bath before that happened. With that in mind, I left my room, but stopped in my tracks. Yume was coming up the stairs right at that moment.

"Are you taking a bath now?"

It was such a simple question, but still, I paused.

"Yeah..."

"Okay."

What a stupid conversation. I passed Yume and began going down the stairs when she called out to me.

"Hey." I turned around to face her. "Well..." She looked down at the floor. "Thanks." She'd said this in such a soft voice that I almost didn't catch it.

I frowned. "What for?"

"You know... For helping with the class discussion."

"As much as I don't want to be, I *am* a committee member too. I

just did my job.”

“But...I wouldn’t have been able to do as well as I did without you, so...thank you.”

She’s thanking me? I looked up at her from partway down the stairs.

“When did you get so put-together?”

“Huh?”

“The you I knew would never have done anything so commendable.” It was only after the words had left my mouth that I realized I’d said too much.

I looked away from her, feeling embarrassed. *Whatever. I’ll just leave.* I took another step down.

“You really prefer who I *used* to be?”

“Huh?”

I turned around again. She looked angry for some reason. Her face was stiff.

“I’m asking if you liked it better when I was frail and unreliable?”

I fell silent for a little before replying. “Maybe... And?”

“If you do, then you can just drown in your memories. But...” A slight smile appeared on her face. “The person I am *now* can listen to whatever’s on your mind.”

“What’s on my mind?”

“You look like you’re lost, just like I was when I gave you that love letter.”

Thinking back, she had looked like a frail puppy drenched in rain back then. “Don’t blow things out of proportion. It’s not like that. I’m not lost or anything.”

“So, what *is* up with you?”

“It’s just that...”

“Yes...?”

“I’ve been worried that a certain girl prone to forgetting things might not remember a certain promise we made.”

“Huh?” She blinked in confusion. *I knew it. She really forgo—* “Wait, are you going to show me your story?”

“Huh?”

“Come on, hurry up and show me! I even went through the trouble of digging mine back up!”

“You...remembered?”

“Of course! You know I have a better memory than most, don’t you?”

My head went blank for a little. I began speaking in order to fill in that blank.

“Yeah... You were always good at remembering useless things.”

“Hey!”

“There was a short period that you were influenced by something and started referring to yourself in the third person—”

“Ah! La la la! I can’t hear you!” she exclaimed, plugging her ears. “Maybe *you* should stop remembering these useless things.”

“I wholeheartedly agree.”

Useless was the perfect word to describe these memories I had from when I was young, immature, and irrational.

“Anyway, come to my room and show me after your bath, okay?”

“I thought we said no going to each other’s rooms at night.”

“Tonight’s special.”

Yume looked downstairs and lowered her voice. “Don’t let our parents see, okay?”

Dammit. My stupid heart always beats faster at the most useless times.

Afterwards, I read the story that Yume had written in the past. There was a detective—essentially a rip-off of Souhei Saikawa from *The Perfect Insider*—who would pretentiously deduce at length absolutely absurd gimmicks used to commit closed-room murders while making completely unrelated comments.

“Lol.”

“Don’t say that with a serious face!” Yume exclaimed.

“I thought you said you wrote an Agatha Christie rip-off. This is a lot more like a Hiroshi Mori rip-off.”

“W-Well...”

“Yeah?”

“I-I wrote this in middle school... I couldn’t find the one I wrote in elementary school.”

“Uh-huh. I hope I’m wrong, but...is this detective who’s completely focused on saying things that make him seem smart, but is just a really watered-down Souhei Saikawa, based off of...”

No way she’d based it off the guy she was dating at the time...right? But her silence told me everything. *Hey, don’t look away.*

“I-I know you think that you’ve won, but your story is really out there too!”

“Huh? You’re kidding. It’s way better than yours.”

“The monologue borders on rambling—it’s hard to tell what he’s even talking about. And you might think your similes are clever, but they don’t make any sense. What do you even mean by ‘it was like curry that’d been over-simmered’?! Is it burnt? Is it bitter?”

“You must not have any reading comprehension abilities! That’s —”

I proceeded to try and explain it in an easy-to-understand way, but she didn’t get it at all. This came as a huge shock to me. I never thought that my writing would be so hard for someone else to understand.

Eventually, a long silence fell between us after we finished going back and forth, dissing each other's work. We gradually calmed down during that time, like we were looking into the wounds that we'd inflicted on each other. Then, I reread our stories and realized something.

"Higashira is actually pretty amazing, you know..." I mused.

"Huh? Does Higashira-san write?"

"Yeah, apparently. Not only that, she draws too. I saw one of her pictures. She didn't trace anything; it was completely original. Every part of the body was drawn well. The ability to make something that elicits praise from anyone is enough to classify her as talented, wouldn't you agree? Comparing that to what we wrote really drives that point home for me."

"Good point... Now that I think about it, your great-grandfather's autobiography was well written too."

"Yeah, especially since his writing was easy to understand," I said with a smirk.

"Uh-huh..."

We both felt pretty defeated. I was still shocked, but honestly, I felt confident. This might help rid Higashira of her self-deprecating tendencies after all.

In the midst of the relaxed atmosphere surrounding us, Yume spoke up in a kind of vacant tone. "Do you...want to be an author?"

"Nope. Maybe in the past, but not anymore."

I didn't feel like I had to write anything in particular. I had neither the desire nor the sense of duty to do so. All I felt was irritation at the fact that I shouldn't be this way. Even so, I didn't know who I wanted to be. I was empty—even more so after trying to pen a story.

"There's something I've never told you," Yume said.

"Hm?"

"My dad actually worked in a creative field."

I leisurely turned to Yume who was holding her knees, resting her head on top of them, while leaning back against the side of the bed.

"By dad...you mean your biological dad? Yuni-san's ex-husband? He was an author?"

"Not an author, but his work involved him producing some sort of creative content. He wasn't one to bring his work home, so I don't really know what he exactly worked on."

"Wait, does your love for mysteries come from...?"

"Yeah... It all started with his bookcase," Yume said falteringly.

"The only thing I vaguely remember about him is his voice. When I was dozing off, I'd hear him announce he was home in a low voice. Then there'd be light that'd leak in from the living room, and I'd hear

mom welcome him back and ask if he wanted food, but he'd respond in the same low voice that he'd already brought something."

"He *brought* food home?"

"Yeah, he'd purposefully buy food to eat when he got back. Then I'd hear the rustling of the plastic bag that he'd brought back, mixed with a disappointed response from mom. That's pretty much all I can remember about him. By the time I'd wake up, he'd be gone. I can't even really remember what he looked like. If I saw him on the street, I doubt I'd even recognize him."

"That's kinda..."

While I could see him being busy, I also got the impression that he rejected the idea of family. Even though he physically lived with them, he acted like he lived alone. He was consciously rejecting them in no unclear terms—or maybe, he was isolating himself. Like he wanted the house split up.

"It's like how you never had a mom to begin with. Not having my dad around was normal for me. I guess he did come to some school events, but thinking back on it, I'm pretty sure that was only because mom dragged him to them."

He'd probably gone kicking and screaming. I could imagine Yuni-san feeling hesitant about forcing him but ultimately realizing she couldn't *make* her husband be a part of their family. And so, she had to make a hard choice. For herself, for her daughter, or maybe even for her husband.

"I know mom went through hell, but personally, I don't really hate my dad."

"Is that...because you never really met him? I mean, how can you hate someone you've never met?"

"That's not it. You see, no one was ever home, but when a child comes across a room filled with all sorts of things, they get excited. It was like nonstop exploration for me."

"Oh..."

I knew where she was coming from. The first time I found my great-grandfather's study, I'd felt like a fire had been lit inside of me.

"Children end up instantly liking the people who give them fun. So, I was thankful to the man who gave me such a fun room to play in," Yume explained. *This kind of story is much more common than I expected.* "Uh...what were we talking about again?"

"About how we have no talent."

"Oh, right. I went off on a bit of a tangent, but my point is that... People who work in creative fields see things differently. In that regard, don't you think that sums up Higashira-san quite nicely?"

"Yeah..."

She had a point. Higashira *did* view things differently. As perfectly

as we got along, I always had a sense that we had different perspectives.

"I wonder what's going through her head... Fundamentally, I don't have any idea what Higashira's thinking right now."

"Maybe try harder? I can't think of anyone but you who could possibly understand her."

"Meaning you don't know either?"

"Hm... Well, now that I think about it, I might have wanted the same thing all this time."

Even though she didn't explain what "thing" she was talking about, I had a feeling I knew. Maybe it was all in my head... Yeah, it had to have been. I was misunderstanding things. *I need to see if I'm right*. My gut was telling me that this was the right action, but the only problem was that I had no clue how to ask the question.

"I...don't think I can see things like Higashira can." I paused. "But I'm pretty sure that I can at least hear her out."

"Don't be so wishy-washy. Just do it." Yume giggled as if she were teasing her little brother. "Feel more confident now?"

"Yeah. Confident that I'm average—nothing special."

"If you're average, what does that make me?"

Before I realized it, the following words came out of my mouth—the ones that I should've said over a year ago when she made her first friend. "You're amazing."

"Huh?"

Let's start by admitting the truth. You were no longer the weak person who needed me to open your canned drink. You could do the things I couldn't. *You are an amazing person*.

"H-Huh? Wh-What does *that* mean? What do you mean by 'amazing'? What about me is amazing?! I need specifics!"

"You're amazingly lacking in writing talent!"

"Excuse me?!"

Well...yeah. Baby steps.

And so, I showed my story to Higashira—I mean, Isana—and as expected, she gave it a horrible review, which greatly contributed to getting her out of her funk. Never in my wildest dreams had I expected that it would've led to this discussion over voice call.

"Fortunately, our school's gearing up for the cultural festival," Kogure Kawanami said through his mic. "Plus, you and Irido-san were both elected as committee members! Now you'll be together more at school *and* at home. Your overall time with each other just skyrocketed! Good job, past me!"

"Uh, no," Isana Higashira, now back to her regular self, interjected calmly. "Not 'good job' at all! Forcing the situation without any prior

conversation is disgusting. It is in the same vein as trying to pressure VTubers into collaborating.”

“Shaddup!” Kawanami snapped. “This is my life’s work!”

Your so-called life’s work is a huge nuisance to me. Write a fanfic or something instead.

“In any case, the cultural festival is a peak teenage life event! I’m not saying you need to confess or anything, but you need some kind of romantic tension! You never know, maybe *she’ll* confess!” Kawanami continued.

“The aforementioned situations certainly occur frequently within light novels and manga; however, will the same situation present itself in real life? Especially at a serious prep school like ours.”

“It’s gonna happen *precisely* ’cause we’re at a serious prep school, dummy. Have you ever seen Kyoto University’s festivals?”

“Ugh... My perceptions are overlapping.”

Apparently, Higashira had come to this school because she thought it’d be a similar gathering of oddballs as Kyoto University. My only impression of the university came from Tomihiko Morimi’s works, though, so I had no clue what to expect.

“Okay, listen up,” Kawanami said, like a teacher trying to get the attention of all the students on a field trip. “Our school always has a bonfire after the cultural festival. You know what a bonfire is, Higashira? It’s a huge fire that people dance around.”

“Of course I know! How ignorant of the world do you think I am?!”

“Anyway, doesn’t it kinda feel like you’ll be tied forever with the person you dance with there?”

“That’s merely a *feeling* you have! It isn’t rumored to be true!” Isana protested.

“You really expect there to be a stupid rumor like that? If there was, it would’ve been ripped outta some rom-com. But real life ain’t manga.”

“So what?” I interjected. “You want *me* to dance with Yume?”

“Yep,” Kawanami said simply but firmly. “Well, actually, you don’t *have* to dance with her. As long as you’re standing around the fire with her, you’re good. You’ll also be able to get rid of that stupid rumor about Higashira being your girlfriend! Two birds, one stone!”

“Wouldn’t that make it seem as if I was dumped at a world record speed?” Isana asked.

“Don’t worry, you’ll just be seen as the poor soul who got her just deserts for trying to get between the Irido siblings.”

“That is *much* worse!” Isana exclaimed.

Can someone explain why I have to do something so obnoxious? I reflexively exhaled.

“Don’t you wanna know how Irido-san feels about you?”

Kawanami asked in a serious tone. “If Irido-san *does* have romantic feelings for you, she will one hundred percent try something given the right opportunity. If she doesn’t, then it’ll just have been nothing but a bit of wasted effort, and you can happily go back to being siblings again. Either way, you’re in limbo right now. Going through with this will let you know where things stand. There’s no disadvantage for you except, well...”

“Kawanami.” It was my turn to interrupt him. “Watch it. Even I have my limits.”

“Ah...my bad. That was pretty tactless of me.”

When are you not tactless?

Isana let out a sigh, most likely having held her breath during our tense conversation.

“Well, what I’m tryin’ to say is, it’s a win-win for you, isn’t it?” Kawanami said.

“What if she *does* have feelings for me though?”

“Date her.”

“Court her.”

Kawanami and Isana spoke at the same time.

“You two make it sound so easy...”

They could only talk like that because they were on the outside looking in. They didn’t know what it was like for two people living in the same house to be in love.

“If you really don’t wanna date her, just say no. Playing with her heart will only make you feel guilty. You gotta set things straight. If you two weren’t living together, you could just pretend like nothing happened for the rest of high school—but you are.”

I hated to admit it, but he was right. If she wanted to go out with me, I couldn’t just turn a blind eye. I would need to sort things out sooner or later. Hopefully, I was worrying over nothing. I would probably be able to go comfortably back to treating her as just a sibling once I cleared my conscience.

“Okay...”

“Oh?” Kawanami reacted.

I very painfully continued speaking. “As long as it’s within the realm of reason, I’ll listen to your advice. Like hell am I gonna botch this and make her think that I fell for her.”

“Okay, then! I hear you loud and clear!”

“If things don’t work out, you still have plan B—me! Let’s go all out!” Higashira agreed.

“Hey, you! As a girl, doesn’t that embarrass you?!”

“Not in the slightest.”

And thus, that’s how I had no choice but to flirt with Yume in

order to determine her feelings. That's right, I had no choice... I didn't...

“Cute in a normal way.”

Thinking back, that date had been my chance. Before summer break, Ayai had invited me to hang out on the weekend. Back then, we could still manage our tepid conversations. We’d only superficially made up, and I wanted to come up with a way for us to return to how we used to be. Now, I knew that our last date had been my final chance to accomplish that.

Ayai had gotten all dressed up in an attempt to make clear to me that she wanted the same. What I had needed to do was simple. So painfully simple. But somehow, the words wouldn’t come out. It wouldn’t have been hard for me before. I shouldn’t have been embarrassed after all that time. But still, I clammed up. All I had to say were a few words, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t say that she looked cute.

Yume Irido

“We’ll be back later.”

“Okay, have fun!” mom said as I left the house with Mizuto, who’d been waiting by the door.

As soon as he saw me locking the door, he started walking. It seemed he had no intention of being a gentleman. *Ugh*. But I’d accounted for this possibility and had purposely worn more comfortable shoes than usual.

He was wearing a hoodie and khakis. It was a very informal outfit—business as usual for him. In contrast, I might not have put as much effort into my appearance as if we were going on a date, but I was still wearing a blouse, a long skirt, and a shawl around my shoulders for the fall vibe.

Looking at the difference in our attire, no one would have even thought we were on a date. We didn’t need to hide this outing from mom. After all, we were going to Madoka-san’s college to look at outfits for the cultural festival.

I caught up to Mizuto and walked by his side. “Is Madoka-san’s college far?” I asked.

“Distance-wise, yeah, but it won’t take too long if we catch the train.”

“The train, huh...”

“If you’re wondering about the fare, we’re taking it out of our

class's budget."

"I'm not worried about the money!"

I'd been thinking back to the time we'd gone out together to get a present for Mother's Day. We'd been stuffed inside a packed train and forced against each other. It was tourist season in Kyoto now, so there was no doubt that the trains would be packed today too. *This is not a date, though.* Well, it wasn't a date, but I *did* have orders from Akatsuki-san.

I recalled our conversation.

"Okay, Yume-chan, the cultural festival is the perfect opportunity! The time you'll spend preparing together will help to close the romantic distance between you two, and then you'll have a great excuse to go on a date. In other words..."

"In other words?"

"There's gonna be an explosion of girls who're gonna hit on Irido-kun!" I flinched a little. "Well, then again, the rumor about him and Higashira-san is still around, so fortunately, that'll probably give him some protection...but some'll definitely go for it anyway."

"B-But there's no way he'd be interested in any rando girls who're in it for their fifteen minutes of fame!"

"Uh, hello? Are you forgetting a certain rando girl who got her fifteen minutes of fame by the name of Higashira-san?" I groaned, knowing she was right. "And that's why you're gonna go on the offensive and slide into his DMs! You have the perfect opportunity in your hands. Now that both of you are committee members, you can go on dates with him without worrying about people thinking you're trying to steal him from Higashira-san!"

"Wh-What am I supposed to do, though? And now there's a slide involved? What even is a DM?"

Akatsuki-san giggled. "Allow me to educate you. What sliding into someone's DMs basically boils down to is..."

"Yes?"

"Making the other person think that you like them."

"I'm not sure how much more obvious I can make it. I already kissed him..."

"Well, uh... You got this, girl!" she cheered, in a tone that didn't inspire any confidence.

She might have pretty much taken her hands off the reins at the end there, but Akatsuki-san had passed on to me the blueprint for the art of coquetry. For example, I could walk half a step closer to him. Try to casually brush against his hand or shoulder whenever I got the opportunity. And even look right into his eyes when we talked. Sure, if someone of the opposite sex or someone you had feelings for did

these things to you, you might begin thinking that they're interested in you.

"Uh, Akatsuki-san, by the way, could I ask you something?"

"What's up?"

"Have you...ever done this before?" Her response was complete silence. "Akatsuki-san? Akatsuki-san?!"

I'd recently begun to realize that though Akatsuki-san had given me all sorts of advice that were really helpful and I was thankful for...her advice came from her time with the boy next door who doubled as her childhood friend. It didn't exactly give her a wealth of experience to pull from. Technically speaking, wasn't she essentially a novice?

Sure, I put more stock in her words than if she hadn't had any experience at all, but, like, when she would talk about closing the distance between childhood friends by brushing up against them, it made me think... *You've totally never done this before, have you? Like...*

Then again, in terms of experience, I was certainly lacking as well. My middle school confession only worked out because I was lucky. I still had no clue why he'd agreed to go out with me. If I was to achieve more success than that unexplainable one in the past, it would behoove me to try everything I could.

At the very least, for now, I could try to close the distance between us by half a step. I shot him a side-glance to see if he was looking at me at all, but it didn't seem like it. *Seriously?! You're a young guy! Do you not think of anything when a girl is this close to rubbing her shoulder against yours?!* He was supposed to have reacted to this...according to Akatsuki-san. Now that I thought about it, though, was this small distance between us anything to fuss over?

We were living under the same roof. This short distance wasn't nearly as stimulating as that. As proof, my heart wasn't even pounding. We were already too close for this to work. I exhaled with disappointment.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing... Just a little bothered by all the people."

I really wasn't looking forward to what was to come.

We took the subway to Kyoto Station, then got on the Nara line before transferring to the Keihan Railway at Tofukuji. All we had to do was ride the semi-express down a few stations to get to one not too far from Madoka-san's college.

There was no way for us to get lost. After all, after we exited the station, the entrance to her school's campus was visible from just around the corner. Surprisingly, even though we were nearing the

middle of September, her school was still on summer vacation. Maybe that explained why there were so few people around.

I noticed an elementary school beside the station. "I'm surprised there's an elementary school nearby. Is it affiliated with the college?" I wondered.

"I doubt they have anything to do with each other, no."

"I didn't know schools could be so physically close to each other."

"I'm pretty sure there's a police school right by this campus too."

"What?! *Three* schools?!"

I'd always heard that Kyoto had a lot of schools, but this was way too many.

The gates to the school were open. I first restlessly looked around before crossing the threshold into a college for the first time in my life. *Oh wow, I'm really on a college campus.*

"Are you *trying* to look suspicious?" Mizuto asked. "You're gonna get arrested."

"I-It's not my fault! I've never been to a college before!"

"You're making such a big deal over a school you're not even attending."

What's your deal?! Would it kill you to share my amazement?!

Mizuto found a map of the campus and nonchalantly walked towards it. His standoffish attitude pissed me off more than it got me down in the dumps. This might not have been a date, but he could've been more considerate!

Visibly annoyed, I stood next to Mizuto and looked at the map to find where we were supposed to meet Madoka-san.

"What was the building called again? The Kenshinkan?"

"Why do they all have to have such annoying-to-read names?" Mizuto grumbled.

It didn't look the part, but the school had a Buddhist influence, so all the different names had roots in Buddhism. The fact that it had many buildings in the first place made it completely different from a middle school or high school.

We were scratching our heads as we tried to decipher the map when someone called out to us.

"Oh, *there* you guys are!" I knew this voice. "Heya!" Someone tapped me on the back.

I jumped a little and turned around to see an older girl in fashionable glasses grinning at us. She had on a lightly colored blouse with a flowing long skirt. From her appearance, you'd think she was a prim and proper lady, but that combined with the voluptuous mounds underneath her shirt made it clear beyond a doubt that this was the same Madoka Tanesato that I'd met a month ago.

"It's been a hot minute! How ya been?"

“Hello, Madoka-san,” I greeted in return. “I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Thanks! I’m glad to see you’re doing well too, Yume-chan.” Then she trailed off as she surveyed my outfit. “Our styles match as usual, huh?”

“Oh.” Now that she mentioned it, we *were* wearing pretty similar outfits.

“S-Sorry. I completely forgot...”

“It’s all good! You’re not gonna be staying in those clothes for too long anyway.” She snickered.

As usual, in contrast to her subdued fashion style, Madoka-san was a bona fide socialite. Mizuto had yet to say a word, but I totally got why. I’d probably have done the same if I was the same person as I had been in middle school.

“Nice to see you too, Mizuto-kun! When was the last time we met up outside our grandparents’ place?”

“No clue. Maybe at some kind of memorial service.”

“Ah yeah, true. You’ve gotten so big!”

Unaffected by Mizuto’s standoffish attitude, she smiled. What a grown-up. But also, what did she mean by he’s “gotten so big”? He couldn’t have possibly grown *that* much in a month.

“Well anyway, let’s get movin’! The costumes are in the club room!”

Just as Madoka-san moved closer, she linked arms with me as if we did it all the time. As she did, my arm sunk into her voluptuous chest. Even as a girl, I couldn’t help but gasp.

The hard sensation from her bra was enough to get my heart racing. *Is this the power of F-cups?* If so, I really wondered how Mizuto felt with Higashira-san’s G-cups always pressing against him. How could he always look so calm? Did he have no libido?!

I didn’t seem to be able to break free at all as we walked through the basically deserted campus grounds. We were cutting through the plaza that had a stage and café when Madoka-san leaned in and whispered in my ear.

“So, Yume-chan, how are *things* going?”

“What things?”

“Y’know, *things*. That whole ‘Higashira-san girl being Mizuto-kun’s girlfriend’ thing? All our relatives think they’re actually dating, but they’re not, right?”

“Yeah...they’re not...but...”

“My, oh, my. There’s a lot goin’ on there, huh?”

I glanced back at Mizuto, who was walking behind us in silence, before continuing. I briefly told her about what had happened recently and how the rumor about the two of them dating had spread to our

relatives and school. At this point, their “relationship” was publicly accepted.

“Wow, well that’s, uh... That’s rough.”

“You can say that again...” Calling it “rough” was the best way to summarize this entire ordeal.

“So you’re trying to use the cultural festival to turn things around? Look at you go!”

“W-Well, my friend was the one who came up with the idea.”

“Oh? Your friend’s quite the smart cookie. I bet we’d get along great!”

True, Madoka-san might have been able to get along with Akatsuki-san as a fellow extrovert, but Madoka-san was much worse at setting the stage for shenanigans. Despite that, they were united in being fearless.

We passed through the large, tall gates, taking us outside for a bit. The building that had the clubrooms in it was detached from the rest of the school. We walked over a crosswalk and into a beautiful, modern-looking building.

“Are you in the theater club, Madoka-san? I couldn’t really get a clear answer from mom.”

“I’m not officially in any club. But I guess, since my boyfriend’s in the theater club. I help out from time to time. I guess you could say I’m kinda like a reserve member.”

“Wait, so is it okay for us to be borrowing costumes then?”

“Yeah, no worries. I already talked to the club about it. We’re all friends, so as long as you bring ’em back, you can borrow ’em for free.”

Wow. Spoken like a true socialite.

“But still...” I hesitated.

Madoka-san giggled and brought her mouth close to my ear. “Don’t use it for anything dirty though, okay? Don’t let ’em get stained.”

“O-Of course I won’t! I wasn’t even thinking about that!”

How could I even pull that off in the first place? I was already pretty confident I could get through cosplaying, but anything more than that and I... *Ugh...*

Madoka-san led us up some stairs and through a hall with doors on either side. I could hear people laughing. Though I was naturally a little curious, Madoka-san didn’t pay them any mind and headed straight to the theater club room. I briefly wondered if colleges still called a place like this a “clubroom” before walking into a messy room. Manga magazines were strewn about, empty plastic bottles littered the desks, and piles of cardboard sat against the wall. *Yeah, I thought, this really does feel like a clubroom!*

“Costumes are in the boxes over there. Go ahead and look.”

“Uh... Is it okay to store them like this?”

“Not at all, but it costs money to rent a closet,” Madoka-san said as she opened a box that had “Costumes” scrawled on it in marker.

There were a wide variety of theatrical costumes packed inside. *I guess it makes sense for them all to be theatrical-looking since they use them in plays.*

“Hm... I thought these would’ve been a little better organized, but they really just shoved ’em in here. Yume-chan, Mizuto-kun, help me sort these.”

“Okay!” I replied while Mizuto just quietly opened up a box.

You could at least be a little more friendly to your relative. What we needed were costumes that could be used in a cosplay café. It’d be best to have some kind of clear theme in order to increase our class’s appeal. Simply using clothes people didn’t see every day wasn’t enough. It had to be something easily recognizable but also enticing.

“Oh! Heh heh. Hey, Yume-chan, what about this?” Madoka-san grinned as she showed me something she’d picked out.

At first, I honestly thought it was cute. It had a waitress-like apron combined with a short-sleeved blouse. It really gave off a European vibe. But looking closely at it...

“Uh... Isn’t the chest area a little too...exposed?”

The way the neckline opened wasn’t normal. It would fully show the cleavage of the person wearing it.

“This is called a dirndl, Yume-chan. It’s a traditional German outfit.”

“O-Oh, really?”

“Yep! They wear them even now during festivals. It’s kinda like their version of kimono, so it’s cultural. Not dirty at all. It shows the same amount of cleavage as a swimsuit, so it’s totes not dirty.”

“You clearly think it’s dirty with the way you’re talking!”

“Why don’t you try it on? It’s a cultural festival, right? So how about German culture, huh?” Madoka-san said, pushing the dirndl towards me and sneering. *Not a chance! Those eyes are lewd!*

“No,” Mizuto firmly stated while putting his arm in between Madoka-san and me. “It doesn’t matter if it’s traditional wear or whatever. That amount of exposure isn’t gonna fly with the management. So, not this outfit,” Mizuto declared, emphasizing his argument point by point.

Madoka-san blinked at him for a bit before her lips curled into a smile. “Ohhh, is that so?” she said as she put the dirndl away. “Okay, I hear you loud and clear. I see your point. You wouldn’t want to expose Yume-chan to who knows how many people in that outfit.”

Mizuto paused before responding. “Please help us find costumes

that won't be rejected due to indecent exposure." Then, he returned to opening boxes.

Uh, did that make you mad? You don't want me wearing anything too exposing? Oh no, I feel like I'm about to grin. Is this why he immediately vetoed anything too exposing during our talk with Akatsuki-san? Because he wants to protect me? Oh my god...

"All righty, Yume-chan, let's find a costume that won't piss Mizuto-kun off." Madoka-san snickered.

"Oh, wait," I said, stopping Madoka-san from putting away the dirndl completely.

"Hm? What's the matter? Do you wanna wear it?" Madoka-san asked, noticing me staring at the garment.

"N-No, not me..." *Higashira-san could really pull this off. She'd look really good in this.* "I was wondering..."

"Hm?"

"Can we borrow costumes for personal use?"

Madoka-san tilted her head. "You can't use them for anything dirty, remember?"

"I-I'm not."

Having Higashira-san wear clothes that exposed her cleavage wasn't dirty! Probably!

I undid the buttons on my blouse. At this very moment, I was getting undressed in a room I'd never been in. Not a particularly comfortable situation, especially considering how Mizuto was right next door.

"Your body is still as perfectly slender as ever, Yume-chan. And your skin's so silky-smooth. So this is what high school girls are like these days, huh?"

Madoka-san, who had already stripped down to her underwear, inspected my body as if she were some kind of judge. Underneath her modest outfit was a matching pair of lacy red undergarments. *Wow. This goes beyond "adult"—this is what a girl would wear specifically to show someone else.*

"Madoka-san...do you normally wear underwear like this?" I asked nervously.

She laughed loudly. "Of course not! They barely ever match, even. I just...plan to show them to someone today, that's all."

"D-Does that mean..." Was she talking about me? Or someone else that she'd meet up with later on?

Smiling suggestively, she unhooked the front of her bra and asked, "Yeah, what does it mean?"

We were in the process of trying on some costumes we'd picked out. Since we had to get a majority vote from our class first before deciding on costumes, Mizuto and I had decided to try some on and

take pictures so everyone could pick later. Mizuto would be the model for the guys, and I would be the model for the girls.

Since there was another room right next door to the clubroom, Madoka-san and I moved here, and left the clubroom as his changing room. For the record, Madoka-san had blurted out that she wanted to try some costumes on too, so that's why she was here with me. Moreover, she was trying on the skimpy costume that both Mizuto and I had rejected. It was so lacking in fabric, in fact, that you couldn't even wear a bra with it.

"Hm..."

The first costume I put on was a standard maid outfit. It had a longer skirt than the kinds you'd normally see in manga and anime, going all the way down to my ankles. Even I wouldn't be embarrassed about wearing this. The frilly headdress was a little much, though...

"Oh, nice! So cute! Go and match up with Mizuto-kun!"

"What is that supposed to mea—"

Madoka-san pushed me out the door, where I found Mizuto, who was wearing a butler outfit. His slender, curveless body was well emphasized by the tight black clothes.

"Oh! Yes! So much yes!" Madoka-san said excitedly while snapping photo after photo on her phone.

As she did, I shot glances at a grimacing Mizuto. He *did* look good. If he were to style his hair, just a little, then... *Wait! Isn't this my chance to flirt with him? If I compliment him, maybe he'll be more conscious of me. O-Okay. I'll do it.*

"H-Hey..."

"Hm?"

"You...look good."

I did it! Sure, I hadn't said it in as clear as a voice I'd liked to, but still, the words had come out. For me, this was a success. After hearing what I said, he paused for a moment before responding.

"Thanks."

That's it?! I was fighting for my life trying to compliment him, and all I got was a "Thanks"?! Where the heck was *my* compliment?! It's common courtesy to say that the other person looks good too! *Grr... You're an otaku—why aren't you reacting to the maid outfit?!*

"Madoka-san! Let's try on the next one!"

"Sure! You're so into this now!"

"Yeah!"

I wore a cheongsam after that. Naturally, the dress slit meant there'd be a decent amount of leg exposure, but Madoka-san suggested wearing skin-colored tights for my comfort. There was just one problem...we didn't *have* any skin-colored tights! And so, I had no choice but to wear it with my bare legs exposed.

How's this?! I thought as I stood before Mizuto with my bold Chinese-style outfit.

"Hm."

That's it?! What is his problem?! Exposing my legs got me so embarrassed that I would even wear tights with our school's uniform! How could *that* be his only reaction to seeing my bare legs?! Afterwards, I also tried on an áo dài, a witch costume, and many other outfits, but none of them worked. I didn't even get real words, just a collection of unimpressed grunts.

"Man, you look cute in everything you wear."

Madoka-san, who was currently wearing a belly dancer-esque outfit that resembled a swimsuit with a veil-like thin cloth, was by far the most excited person here. When someone as voluptuous as Madoka-san wore an outfit like that, it felt like her taking even a step out of the room would be a crime, but Mizuto didn't react to her at all. Madoka-san was also impressive in the sense that she seemed to have no problem crossing her porcelain thighs, completely exposing them, as she nonchalantly went through all the pictures she'd taken.

"This reminds me of how cute you looked in your yukata. Long black hair and Japanese clothes are a match made in heaven!"

"Well...regardless of whether that's true or not... Japanese clothes might not be a bad idea. They're low on exposure too."

"True, the PTA might be more willing to okay them. Hm, do we have a shrine maiden outfit lying around somewhere?" Madoka-san got on all fours and dug through a box. *W-Watch where you're sticking your butt. I can pretty much see everything!*

"Ah." As I tried to block Mizuto's vision, Madoka-san pulled something out. "Here we go! How about this?"

"Is this..."

It looked like a kimono, but only the top half. Honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised to discover that it was a shirt made to look like a kimono. In addition, Madoka-san also held pants that resembled hakama.

"How to explain... Oh, I know. I have pictures from last year's cultural festival!" Madoka-san flipped through her phone and turned the screen to me. "Here we go!" There was a girl up on a stage. The top half of her outfit was a red, vibrant kimono, while the bottom half was a dark brown hakama, and on her feet were...boots?

"So cute!"

"I know, right? I think this style's called Taisho Roman. I'm pretty into it myself!"

It was a cross of Japanese and Western styles. Cute but also cool while keeping skin exposure to the minimum. To put it plainly, this would draw people in. *This might be the best one so far.* It definitely

wouldn't get shot down. Plus, it felt like cosplay and had a solid concept. Most of all, though, there was probably no way that any of the other classes would be able to get these kinds of costumes together, so there wouldn't be any overlap.

"Are there guy outfits too?" I asked.

"Yeah, here you go," Madoka-san said, swiping to the next picture.

"Shosei-style!"

The combination of kimono, hakama, student hat, and cloak was the very definition of the Shosei-style, the standard wear of male students in the Taisho era.

"Nice, right?"

"Yes!" I emphatically nodded in agreement.

The intelligence that this look exuded completely overruled any fondness I had for the butler outfit. So good! So, so good! The only problem now was whether the other committee member would be okay with it. I slowly turned to Mizuto and hesitantly opened my mouth.

"What...do you think?"

"Well... It definitely checks all the boxes."

Hm? This was the most positively he'd reacted to anything so far. He might not have said it in so many words, but maybe he felt like we'd found our answer.

"Well, how about you try it on, for starters? Mizuto, you too!"

Huh?! Oh, right, we need to take pictures. I gulped as I began changing. *M-Mizuto's going to wear those cool Shosei-style clothes?*

Fortunately, though my outfit resembled a kimono, it wasn't nearly as difficult to put on. The size was also easy to adjust. Finally, I tapped the tips of the boots to check how they felt.

"Let's put your hair up a bit," Madoka-san said, taking a part of my hair and tying it behind my head, pinning it in place with a hairpin. I had the same half-up hairstyle as Madoka-san. Like this, I looked a lot more like a girl from the Taisho era.

"Very nice! Very stylish!"

Madoka-san's compliments made me feel good. I shook my body side to side, and tried swinging my hair, sleeves, and hem of the hakama. Seeing my silhouette didn't feel real. I almost didn't believe it was me—like I was fawning over a doll. It wasn't nearly as embarrassing as the other outfits either. And since it was designed for use in plays, it was easy to move around in. But most importantly, it was cute.

"How many of these are there, Madoka-san?"

"You like it?"

"Well, yeah... I do..."

“There are probably four or five of the girls’ costumes. Combine that with the guys’, and you should have enough for the people working the café.”

In that case, it all depended on how the guys’ costumes looked. I was already positive that it’d be fine, though. After all, I’d seen that guy more than I’d seen anyone else over this past half year. *I already have a good idea what will and won’t look good on him without him needing to wear it.* We knocked on the door and returned to the room where Mizuto had changed.

I practically squealed when I saw him, but Madoka-san shouted like an action manga character, drowning me out. Madoka-san, her eyes twinkling, ran up to Mizuto as he turned to look at us with a calm expression.

“M-Mizuto-kun?! What? It really *is* you! It really is the same small but cute Mizuto-kun!”

“How old do you think I am?” Mizuto sighed, annoyed.

He was wearing the same kimono, hakama, and hat from the picture I’d just seen. *It’s good. It’s really good.* I’d been right in my assumption. The Shosei-style outfit really worked with his slender body and intelligent aura. *I... I don’t think I can...*

“B-Book! Mizuto-kun, hold a book under your arm! An old Japanese book with the binding and stuff! There should be one in the prop box! Yes! Yes! That’s it! Hm... Something feels like it’s missing, though.”

“G-Glasses! Madoka-san, glasses!”

“That’s it!”

Madoka-san and I excitedly rummaged through props to find fake glasses. When he put them on, Madoka-san was pretty much blown away. Though I didn’t join her in her excited screams, I felt exactly the same.

Madoka-san covered her mouth with both of her hands and began trembling. “C-Cute... C-Cool... Cu... Co... I can’t hide how shaken I am that my relative had *this* much potential, Mizuto-kun!”

“You’re overreacting, Madoka-san.” Mizuto sighed. “This is nothing to write home about.”

“Oh, that formal tone is perfection!”

I was furiously nodding in agreement. He looked good as a private tutor, but this was also good. Really, *really* good! I had no words. I couldn’t come up with any way to describe this!

“C-Could you two stand next to each other real quick? C’mon!”

“Huh?”

Madoka-san grabbed us by the shoulders and lined us up next to each other. *W-Wait, don’t get so close! I’m gonna die!*

“Yes! This is so good... *This* is Taisho. This is *really* Taisho! Get

closer to each other!” Madoka-san said very excitedly while snapping photo after photo.

Glancing at Mizuto, I froze up. Our shoulders were just *barely* not touching. The brim of his hat cast a shadow on his juvenile face, giving his expression a somber feel. I had to hold myself back from screaming in delight. *M-My face! I don't think I can keep a straight face!*

“I think you guys got it! Your school’s cultural festival’s open to the public, right? I’ll be there for sure!”

Now that her impromptu photo shoot had ended, I moved away from Mizuto. To help my heart calm down, I took a deep breath and exhaled. Then I saw Madoka-san beckoning me over. *Hm? Does she need something?* I walked up to her.

“Look at this. It’s the best one I took!” she said, showing me her phone.

On it was a red-faced girl glancing at the guy next to her. *My emotions are written all over my face!* I became so distracted by how weak my defenses were that I didn’t notice a certain something until Madoka-san pointed it out.

“Look here,” she said, snickering. Mizuto had been glancing at me too. “He might not have said it out loud, but I think he really liked it.”

I immediately hid my mouth with the sleeve of the kimono. *I can't hold back anymore. I can't stop myself from smiling!*

“U-Um, could you...”

“I know. I’ll send it to you, okay?”

I thanked her in a soft voice. Then, I looked at Mizuto, who seemed to be feigning ignorance. The more I thought about it—whether when he had blocked the idea of more risqué clothes or right now—there was something about him that made me have a lurking suspicion... *Could he possibly be interested in me?*



After changing back into our normal clothes and putting everything away, Madoka-san invited us to tour the rest of the college since we were already here. An opportunity like this didn't come every day, so I took her up on her offer. Mizuto, on the other hand, voiced his desire to go home, but ultimately, he ended up walking around with us.

Madoka-san showed us around the gym, cafeteria, lecture halls, and even gave us a quick peek into the library. After all that, we took a break at the central plaza's café. I didn't feel too strongly about cafés, but being in a college one felt extremely interesting. I felt so out of place until I sat across from Madoka-san.

"Scooch in more."

Anything that'd been on my mind until then was replaced by Mizuto sitting next to me. *H-He's choosing to sit next to me even though there's an open seat next to Madoka-san?! No, calm down!* It was only logical that he'd feel more comfortable around his stepsister than his cousin. That had to be it. *Argh! I can't stop my mind from wandering, though!*

Madoka-san picked up the menu. "What do you want? They have cake and stuff at fair prices! Order whatever you want!"

Hm, what should I do? We're going to have dinner, so it's probably best to get something light. "Oh, the cake and parfait both look good..."

"I'm probably just gonna get a coffee," Madoka-san said. "What about you, Mizuto-kun?"

"I'll have black tea...and this cake."

"Huh?"

He was pointing at the cake I was thinking about getting.

"I'll get the cake, and you can get the parfait. As long as we share, we'll get to try both. Sound good?" he said nonchalantly.

"Oh... Y-Yeah. True." *What? That's so nice! I-Is he my boyfriend? Are we going out?!*

"Interesting..." Madoka-san's eyes sparkled in response to Mizuto's suggestion.

I knew it! She's reacting too! I knew this wasn't just me making things up! He has a thing for me! He totally does! No wait, calm down. This was Mizuto we were talking about. He might have just been particular about what he ate. Yeah. That had to be it...right?

Not too long after, a parfait was served to me and a cake to Mizuto. The parfait wasn't too big, so it made for a perfect snack. The ice cream on top wasn't too sweet and actually had some sourness to it. *Hm, I might've preferred if it were sweeter.*

"How is it?" Mizuto asked expressionlessly before taking a bite of the chocolate cake and then pushing the plate over to me. In return, I

slid the parfait over to him.

“Huh? Aren’tcha gonna feed each other?” Madoka-san asked, a wide grin on her face.

Sure, that’s something people did when sharing food, but there was no way that he’d ever do anything so flirty in front of people—especially his relative. But then again, maybe with how he was acting today, he might actually...

“No,” he said flatly. *Yeah... I don’t know what I was hoping for.*

“That’s not something you do in public.”

Hearing these words made my brain stop working for a little.

Madoka-san looked at him, puzzled. “Huh? That makes it sounds like you would do it in private.”

“I’ll leave it to your imagination,” he replied. *Huh? Wh-Why isn’t he flat out rejecting the idea? Usually, he’d get all sulky and say—*

“What’s wrong, Yume? You’re spacing out.”

“Huh? N-No, I-I’m just thinking... Y-You know how it is. Calories and all that!” I said frantically as he looked at me. *H-He’s worrying about me? He really is nicer than usu—*

“Oh. Even you care about that kinda stuff, huh?”

“Huh? What do you mean by ‘even you’?!”

“You laze around and eat snacks, so I didn’t think you were worried about your weight.”

“I-I don’t...*not* eat snacks, but I *definitely* don’t laze around!”

Are you going to be nice or mean? Pick a lane!

The sun had begun to set by the time we were done exploring the campus. Since we needed to get back home soon and Madoka-san had plans, we decided to go our separate ways, so we left the school by the gate closest to the station.

Madoka-san pulled out her phone to check the time. “We’re going out for drinks with friends in Kiyamachi, and my boyfriend should be coming to pick me up soon... Oh, there he is.”

A car pulled up a little bit away from us. Madoka-san waved to the guy sitting in the driver’s seat. *So that’s her boyfriend?* He wasn’t right in front of me, so I couldn’t really tell, but he seemed kinda...tired.

“Okay, kids, it was fun. I’m looking forward to your cultural festival!” Madoka-san said before jogging towards the car. She stopped by the driver’s side window to say thanks before circling around to sit in the passenger’s seat. She waved to us as the car sped off, quickly disappearing into the distance. Somehow, the idea of getting around in your boyfriend’s car felt extremely mature. As I silently watched them disappear, I felt impressed.

“They’re going out for drinks, right?” Mizuto asked.

“Huh? Yeah, that’s what she said.”

“But he can’t drink because he’s the designated driver, right?”

I fell silent. Madoka-san had said that losers were her type, but...she was a real slave driver. Or maybe... I began thinking about the underwear I’d seen when we were changing. Was she planning on letting loose while keeping her boyfriend sober?

Then I started imagining Madoka-san slovenly laying on the bed, her body wrapped in her fancy, wine-red underwear. But I quickly stopped my mind from wandering any further. Though we might not have been blood related, I couldn’t help but feel that having those kinds of fantasies about my cousin was very awkward!

At any rate, the two of us crossed the street and walked to the station. The distance between us was the same as normal—just about a half step. Business as usual. We didn’t even really talk. I had no doubt that today would end the same way that it would’ve half a year ago.

But...I didn’t want things to be the same as always. I had Akatsuki-san’s support and Mizuto had been...just a little more considerate than usual. So...it would be fine. It definitely would be okay to try something.

“So...” I pushed myself forward as the words spilled out of my mouth. “Was I... U-Uh, wait. No. The clothes I wore today! Were they...cute?”

I had a chance to succeed. Thinking back, the picture that Madoka-san had taken of us—the gaze it captured from him—told me what he really thought, deep down. So even if he said anything mean now—

“It was normal.” *See? It’s like against his nature to be honest about anyth—* “Cute in a normal way.”

Huh? “Huh?”

“Crap.” Mizuto quickly covered his mouth. “W-Wait a second! Wait! I said that wrong.”

“Said what wrong?”

“Well... Dammit! My brain’s messed up. This is all because I had to do something I’m not used to...”

He began grumbling and quickened his pace as if to run away from me. I sped up too while a smile spread across my face. *I’m happy. So, so happy!* More than the compliment itself, I was happy that I was able to honestly accept it. *Listen. I like you, okay? I like you, okay?* I said these not with words, but with the gaze I shot into his back as he walked in front of me. I wasn’t about to tell him that just yet, but someday...someday I would. For sure.

Mizuto Irido

After we got back home, I remembered what Kawanami had told me.

“Listen up, Irido. You don’t have to do anything flashy. Just change your words and actions a *little*.”

My goal was to confirm Yume’s feelings. To do that, I had to make some moves on her. Both Kawanami and Isana had emphasized that today’s excursion was the best chance to do that.

“Be a little nicer—a little more manly. *Just* a little. That’s all you need to do. Surprisingly, that’ll be enough to hook her,” Kawanami had said.

“Indeed!” Isana had chimed in. “Mizuto-kun is always cold, so acting marginally kinder would make him seem completely different!”

“How nice, Casanova.”

Everything I’d done today had been at the behest of those two. I hadn’t made moves on Yume of my own volition. There was no way I’d ever fall for her again. But...

“It’s simple. I’m not tellin’ you to lay on the praises and call her cute or anything,” Kawanami had said.

“I said too much...” I lamented in the present.

I’d completely messed up. I did something they hadn’t told me to do. What a mistake. A complete, utter failure. I had absolutely no reason at this point in time to call her cute.

Yume Irido

When I showed the sample picture of the Taisho outfits to the girls in the class, they all excitedly squealed.

“Ohmigod, cute!”

“C-C-C-C-C-C-C-Cuuuuuuute!!!” Akatsuki-san’s reaction really stood out from all of them.

“Akki broke!” Maki-san said.

“Down. Down, Minami-chan.” Nasuka-san said.

Both of them were trying to restrain the heavily panting Akatsuki-san. I was starting to feel like I was kind of in danger, so I took a step back.

“That’s so nice! Wow, it’s so good!”

“I wanna wear it too! I don’t think I’ll look as good as Irido-san though...”

“Totally. Me too!”

I was pretty sure this was all just because the outfits were really well made, but it also embarrassed me. I hadn’t shown them the important picture yet, though.

“Are there any guys in our class who would look good in these?”

“Yeah, the Shosei look, right? They’d need to look smart.”

“Can’t really think of anyone like that who’s smart, cool, and

slender...”

The more they talked, the more that the girls began gradually looking in a certain direction where a guy who was ignoring his surroundings while reading a book—who was slender and had some of the best grades in the year—was sitting. I tried my best but failed to stop myself from grinning like an idiot. I’d been waiting for this. I swiped on my phone to show Mizuto in the Shosei costume.

“Whoa!!!”

There was a resounding scream of excitement, filling me with a strange sense of superiority. Mizuto had a disgusted expression on his face as he looked at us from his seat. It was settled. The activity we would submit for approval would be *Taisho-Era Café*.

“Yeah. Maybe.”

I wasn't stupid—I knew that Ayai had absolutely no ill intent—but I was stubborn and jealous. Even so, I couldn't forgive the idea of her seeing me like that.

“So, um, there's this girl in my class who was reading a book, and I talked to her about you, and—”

You're kidding me, right? You just got mad at me the other day for having a completely innocent conversation with another girl. Why are you telling me about your chat with someone else? Taking pity on me now that you have a friend, like everyone else? What do you think I am, a charity case?

“Stop. I don't care about your stupid friend.”

I know. I know. I could have phrased that better. No matter how betrayed I felt. No matter how badly I wanted you to only be friendly with me, Ayai hadn't been so thoughtless with her actions.

If her friend had been the source of our relationship's deterioration, logic dictated that everything would have been fixed if we became mutual friends. *I know. I know. I know!* I should've swallowed my pride and just said literally anything else to keep my intrusive thoughts hidden. I should've chosen my words more carefully. At the very least, I knew that deep down.

Mizuto Irido

My first time in the conference room wasn't all that different from the average class break period. It was abuzz with excited chatter from various committee members, who were all seated by their class year, and felt like a gathering of acquaintances.

Yume and I entered that lax atmosphere and found our names on the white board along with where we were seated as representatives of class 1-7.

“I didn't expect it to be *this* chill...” Yume whispered.

“Well, we all may have a fancy title as committee members, but this is a glorified gathering of people who picked the wrong option in rock, paper, scissors. Basically, we're all a bunch of losers.”

“There's definitely a better way to phrase that...”

People don't *volunteer* to be on committees like this, so it was only natural that morale was low. No teacher had arrived yet, and I feared that the meeting would have a loose atmosphere as well if we weren't

careful. Luckily, my worries disappeared as soon as the door opened and *she* walked in.

A small-framed girl entered, immediately eliciting silence from the second- and third-years, making the first-years follow suit. Accompanying her were a male student and a teacher. The three of them sat at the long desk in front of the whiteboard, with the girl in the middle.

The girl had a shockingly childlike look. She was short, somewhere between Minami-san and Yume's heights, and she wore the school sweater instead of the blazer. What made her stand out was not her unique, asymmetrical hairstyle, but rather the contrast between her small frame and the overwhelming presence she radiated. It was like I was in the presence of a genius, like Osamu Dazai or Alexandre Dumas. The room had fallen so silent that I could hear the ticking of the clock above the whiteboard. As soon as it was time for the meeting to start, she began speaking.

"Be seated. We will begin the meeting now." Her voice, serene and beautiful as a bell, rang across the entire room, practically commanding any students who were still standing to immediately sit, like soldiers receiving orders. She smiled at them as if to praise them for their obedience before speaking once again. "Let's begin with introductions. I'm the vice president of the student council, Suzuri Kurenai. On my left is the treasurer, Joji Haba, and on my right, our adviser, Mr. Arakusa."

The guy to her left slightly bowed his head as he was introduced. "Pleasure," Mr. Arakusa said in a deep voice.

What was the name of the treasurer again? Joji Haba? His existence felt so faint that I'd almost forgotten his name despite him being introduced not even a whole minute ago. His hair seemed naturally curly and his glasses were unfashionable—barely enough to make you notice his presence. He was pretty much the complete opposite of the vice president.

"Let's begin with an explanation. Every year, the cultural festival is the last job that the student council takes care of during their term. Because of that, it's customary for the current president to work behind the scenes and select their replacement to lead the committee members. In short, I will be the next student council president in a month's time. There's no harm in taking this opportunity to leave a good impression on me. Am I wrong?"

Nobody reacted to the content of what the future student council president had said. Instead, there was a buzz of comments—especially from the first-years.

"She's, uh..."

"Yeah, she's kinda..."

“Boyish?”

She did come across as more masculine than the average girl. Suzuri Kurenai slowly turned to face the first-years. That was enough to shut them up, but she smiled gently.

“If you have something you’d like to say, there’s no need to be shy simply because I’m a girl. Who I am is a simple difference in chromosomes. Everyone—boy, girl, or otherwise—should feel free to speak their mind to me.”

She was extremely confident. If she had any sort of insecurities, she didn’t let them show at all. Her demeanor practically declared that she wasn’t afraid of what anyone thought of her, and it was a matter of fact that she belonged here. She was obviously not an average person.

Yume leaned in and whispered once again. “Kurenai-senpai apparently has the best grades that this school has ever seen, and it’s not even close.”

“If I remember right, a lot of our alumni have gone on to become politicians or famous academics. You’re saying she’s beaten *all* of them in grades?”

“I’ve heard that she’s a shoo-in for both Tokyo and Kyoto University.”

What the hell? This was like a bad joke. *She’s the real deal. A genius.* Maybe I could’ve avoided going through all the trouble of writing my crappy short story. I could’ve just shown this real-life genius to Isana instead.

“Well, that does it for introductions. Let’s get right into today’s topics. Regarding the ideas for your classes that you all submitted the other day...” As soon as she began speaking, the lax atmosphere that had once filled the room vanished without a trace.

Her dignified presence that commanded respect made her feel like she was from a different planet. In contrast, Yume gazed at her with awe, captivated.

“Aw, so there really was overlap with other classes,” Minami-san said after we came back to the classroom and shared what’d happened in the meeting.

Since other classes wanted to do a cosplay café too, we needed to present on why we deserved to be one of the classes allowed to do it. This meant that Minami-san had to do our class’s presentation, as per her promise.

There was a total of five classes that wanted to do a cosplay café. Suzuri Kurenai, who was also a member of the executive committee organizing the cultural festival, declared that all five classes would do a presentation, and they’d pick the best two. We’d already planned for

this, so it didn't come as too big of a surprise. The only problem was that the schedule was a lot tighter than we'd expected. We needed to decide the contents of our presentation quickly.

Minami-san tilted her head. "It's okay if I just read off a script for the presentation, right?"

"Well, the two of us are planning on writing everything out... Right?" Yume asked me.

"It's a pain and a half, but yeah. It'll be faster that way."

It would've been nice if the most popular girl in the class was a little more reliable, though...

"What kind of things should I focus on? Maybe how cute Yume-chan is?"

"Akatsuki-san, let's not..."

"That would be false advertising," I said curtly. "As class reps, we'll be busy with other work, so we won't be in the class too much on the day itself."

"Then what am I supposed to do?!"

"Well, normally, the most important thing would be to make sure our presentation leaves a good impression. But in this case, we need to demonstrate that we can actually operate the café without any problems. I'm sure the organizers want to steer clear of thoughtless proposals that could result in any potential problems."

"True... Should we keep the menu simple then?"

"Yeah, probably." I paused. "But they might interpret a simple menu as us cutting corners. What we need to do is highlight a concrete action plan in the case of any problems."

Minami-san tilted her head. "What kind of problems?"

"Loads of potential ones. Like how there's a limit to what we, as people who have absolutely no experience working in the food service industry, can anticipate. But maybe the biggest one is...unwanted advances."

"Ugh, you're so right. The festival is invite-only, but some people outside our school will be coming. Okay, how about we put posters up in our class that say, 'Hit on anyone and die!'"

"That's a mood killer. Not to mention, some people might try arguing that they weren't hitting on anyone and were just talking."

"We'll have all the girls surround and pressure any idiot that tries to make that excuse."

"And you're prepared to explain that to the student council and PTA?"

"Argh! This is so annoying!"

In reality, since the café would be on school grounds, we'd have home advantage, meaning that it would be possible to use our numbers to drive out any inappropriate customers. The only problem

was whether or not that would be good enough to ease the concerns of the organizers.

The three of us pensively groaned. As expected, this wasn't easy to navigate for novices like us.

"How about you do a test run?" Kogure Kawanami, who had apparently been eavesdropping, suddenly called out. I looked at his insincere face and replied, "What do you mean?"

"Y'know, you simulate a situation with an inappropriate customer and see how you'd deal with 'em. Even though it's fake, it'll give you an idea about what will and won't work, don'tcha think?"

"Huh? Pretending to hit on someone is—"

"Nice! Good idea!" Minami-san excitedly chimed in, interrupting me. *Uh...what? She usually criticizes everything Kawanami suggests.*

"Practice makes perfect! You've never been hit on, have you, Yume-chan? You should get an idea of what it's like ahead of time. With someone close to you, preferably. Like a family member! That way, you'll be better prepared if it ever happens to you!"

"H-Huh? A family member?"

"Yeah, exactly! It'll make things easier. Isn't that right, Irido?" Kawanami said, fishing for an answer.

Yume quickly glanced at me. *What is even happening right now?* Before I could do anything to stop this nonsense in its tracks, I felt Minami-san pushing me.

"Okay, Irido-kun! Break a leg! Just go with the flow."

"Do *what* now?"

I understood I needed to act, but I had no idea how to flirt. In the midst of my confusion, Yume nervously squeezed her fists while waiting for me to make a move. *Fine! You wanna play along that badly?!* With everyone on board, how was I supposed to be the only opposing voice?

Dammit. How do I need to talk for it to come across as flirty? In light novels and manga, guys typically acted flippant and overfamiliar with girls they liked, but in the real world, I'd only ever seen the complete opposite.

"O-Okay, here I...go?"

"G-Go...ahead?"

While being unnecessarily nervous, I began playing out the flirting strategy I'd come up with.

"Where do you hail from?"

"U-Uh..."

"What pastimes are you interested in?"

"W-Well..."

"Your attire today is quite—"

"What is this, an arranged marriage meeting?!" Minami-san loudly

interjected.

What are you complaining about? I'm doing what you asked.

"Nobody in the world flirts like that! What the hell do you mean, 'Where do you hail from'?! Are you interviewing her for a job or something?!"

"I thought hitting on someone was all like, 'Where do you reside?'"

"Stop speaking so formally!" she snapped at me. "Also, what the hell, Yume-chan? Stop swooning over his shitty flirting!"

"B-But—" Yume faltered. "Then why don't *you* show me how it's done?!"

"Huh? Me?"

"She's got a point. If you've got a problem, it'll be faster if you show us how it's done. Isn't that right, Kawanami?"

"You want *me* to play the guy part?" Kawanami asked.

Duh. You're the one who suggested it in the first place.

"Ugh, fine. I'll show you how it's done. Take notes, okay? Get ready, Kawanami!"

"Yeah, yeah." Kawanami sounded annoyed, but as soon as he turned to Minami-san, he changed. "Hey, girl. Damn, you're cute. Lemme get those digits."

"Mm... I dunno," Minami-san said playfully. "You're not gonna leave me on read, are you?"

"Course not! I'mma insta-respond."

"Hm... When you say 'insta,' how many seconds do you mean?"

"Like two or so?"

"Two seconds? Two seconds, right? Two seconds is your answer, right? That's what I heard. I'm gonna hold you to that, okay? You're gonna respond to me in two seconds even if you're eating, on the toilet, or in the bath, okay?"

"Uh... No, wait—"

"I'll keep messaging you until you respond, okay? I'll keep messaging you over and over and over and over again until you respond, okay? Do you understand? Don't lie to me, okay? Don't betray me, okay?"

"Urp." The confidence in his face drained away, and he turned a sickly green as he covered his mouth.

"You okay?"

"Bathroom..."

And with that, our resident flirt, Kogure Kawanami, fled the scene.

"Hmph, don't try hitting on someone you don't wanna go out with, dumbass," Minami-san grumbled.

"I...will do my best to never leave you on read." Fear coated

Yume's words.

"Wow, this might have some practicality." *Just not for the café we're planning to do.*

"Do you have an escape plan if anyone ever hits on you?" I asked Isana. *I'm still not used to calling her by her first name.*

Classes had ended for the day, and we'd met up at our usual spot in the library.

"Huh? Am I to be subjected to violence?"

"I'm almost relieved by how removed from reality you are."

"Jokes aside, I would most likely flee."

As expected. I could vividly imagine her panicking and running full speed away without a word.

"In a way, that might be the most sensible response. But it's not gonna work if you're serving a customer. Unless..."

A girl getting pestered could switch out with a guy, sure, but she'd have to safely get away first. Overall, the best strategy would be to prevent anyone from making a move in the first place.

"In light novels and manga, it is standard for the protagonist to dazzlingly rescue the heroine from those situations. Regrettably, no such protagonist exists in my life."

"I'm not a huge fan of those. It's like their world is purposefully crafted in clichés just to build up the protagonist."

"But it's the perfect event that allows one to easily feel as if they are a prince or princess! I suppose you're not the type to enjoy these kinds of opportunistic events, though."

"I'm fine with situations that serve to enrich the story, but the world of books is so oversaturated with situations in which characters get hit on that it's hard to get excited about them."

"You are quite rigid in your thinking. I believe it's okay if events in romantic comedies are repetitious. What kind of flirting would not be considered cliché in your mind, Mizuto-kun?"

"Okay, let me guess. You want me to demonstrate."

A gross laugh escaped Isana's lips. "This almost feels like the beginning of a comedy routine."

I couldn't believe I had to do this twice in one day. If I was as polite with my words as I had been with Yume, she'd quip that it sounded like we were at an arranged marriage meeting—just as Minami-san had. But then again, customers who'd politely hit on others weren't the types we had to devise countermeasures for. In this situation, it'd be best if I acted like an inconsiderate, persistent jerk.

"Hey."

"Yes? Oh, have you begun?"

"You look free. Come with me."

“Huh? I’m not exactly free.”

“Shut up. Don’t talk back to me.”

“Huh? Are you trying to act like one of those arrogant, forceful types?”

“Are you tryin’ to reject me?”

“U-Uh... I-I have some business I must attend to, or rather, this is kinda bad...”

“What is ‘bad’ exactly? Spit it out.”

“Oh! I was wrong! You’re acting like a supervisor misusing his power!” Isana, who had been so timid just a minute ago, immediately returned to her usual self.

The atmosphere I’d tried so hard to create immediately dispersed. “This is harder than I thought.”

“Oh no, you have talent, Mizuto-kun! I request that you firmly grab me by the wrist! You know what I mean! Like in the promotional materials for romantic movies! Hurry! Try it!”

“Why are *you* becoming the annoying customer we need to deal with?” I exhaled while shoving Isana away as she vigorously tried to scoot closer to me. “The actual problematic customers would be worse than this, though, honestly.”

“I hold you in high esteem as one who tried and yet was not physically capable of being such a ruffian!”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“I suppose real-life ruffians would lean more towards sexual harassment, such as, ‘Wow those are some huge tits. Can I rub them?’”

“That’s just something you want me to say to you...”

“P-Perhaps when we’re in the privacy of your home...”

“Keep your fantasies to yourself.”

She had a point about sexual harassment. That could totally happen.

“By the way, why are you brainstorming strategies to counteract being hit on? Are you planning a date with Yume-san or something?”

“No. It’s for our class’s café. It’s best if we come up with strategies beforehand.”

“Wow, that is some difficult thinking.”

“Isana, I know that you’ve been able to live life while avoiding a lot of things, but...”

“How dare you make these assumptions about me?! What do you know about me?! Sure, you’re not incorrect, but still!”

I ignored her interjection and continued. “When you know some kinda trouble is gonna come your way, what would you do first?”

“Is that not obvious?”

“Hm?”

“Open up a wiki guide.”

“I’m not talking about games...”

“I’ve only ever run into trouble in games! Please don’t underestimate just how bereft of experiences my life is!”

I’ve made a huge mistake asking her of all people. Wikis were for posting tips and strategies for games. There wasn’t anything like that for real life...

“Wait.” *It’s not impossible. As long as I don’t limit my ideas to be cultural festival-specific then...* “Isana, you’re the owl to my ocarina of time.”

“That doesn’t feel like a compliment!”

“As thanks, I’ll do the thing you wanted me to.”

“Huh?”

“Grip.”

Isana began making a myriad of sounds both excited and surprised. *I have an idea now. All that’s left is to tighten up our defenses.*

“Hey, Irido. I got what you asked for. I sent pictures of them over LINE.”

“Thanks. Bring them tomorrow so I can see what they look like in person too.”

“Sure, but what are you gonna use them for?”

The pictures he’d sent were of the invitations for general admission from last year’s cultural festival as well as the guest list.

Anyone who went last year would have a copy of the former, but only the school would have the latter. *I know I asked him to get it, but I can’t believe he actually did.*

“So, let me get this straight. For general admission, you’re required to show your invitation at the entrance and write your name down on the guest list?”

“Yep. I’m gonna say this right now, but it’s impossible to investigate each and every name on the list. An upperclassman just so happened to have this pic I sent, in fact.”

“It’s good enough.”

The names weren’t what was important—the warning at the top of the sheet was. It read: “All visitors are liable for any trouble caused.” Further down, it stated that photos would be taken for promotional purposes. By signing your name, you’d be indicating that you’d read and understood these terms. The same thing was written on the invitations too. It was highly unlikely that they’d suddenly change the wording this year.

“Should be good,” I said.

“What’re you plannin’, Irido?”

“Nothin’ much.” I picked up the book I’d been reading. “Just knocking out one of the annoying tasks.”

By the time I finished reading, it had gotten pretty late—high time for me to brush my teeth and sleep. Dad, Yuni-san, and Yume should've been fast asleep by now, so I did my best to not make a sound as I went down the stairs, but as I left my room, I saw some light coming out of Yume's door.

I couldn't help but peek inside. It was as if I was being invited in. Yume was sitting at her desk, taking notes while referencing some kind of book. I realized what she was doing as soon as it registered that she was consolidating information.

I'd been left to deal with countermeasures for potential problems while Yume had been tasked with finalizing our proposal. Making a menu and decorations to match what one would expect from a Taisho-themed cosplay café would help make our proposal more attractive, but it also meant researching customs from back then.

I knew she'd looked for books that could help in the library, but I had no idea she'd been working so late into the night, pushing herself hard for a job she'd essentially been forced into doing. I found it touching for a brief moment before it hit me that exchanging sleep for results was a method of the past. There was no need to remind her of what had happened when she pushed herself for the fitness test. She'd failed more times than I could count after pushing herself too hard. I couldn't watch her go down the same path again.

I pulled open the door and knocked, drawing Yume's attention. "Ah... You're still awake?" she asked.

"Yep. Just like you." She seemed unaware of her current situation, which annoyed me. "It's fine to take things seriously, but don't let it eat into your sleep. Have you forgotten about how you collapsed from exhaustion last time?" I'd said this in the snidest tone I could muster, but for some reason, Yume returned my negativity with a light giggle.

"Worried about me?"

"Who do you think has to clean up your messes?"

"Maybe collapsing wouldn't be that bad of an idea, if it'll increase your burden." *You'd really put your health on the line just to piss me off?* Yume giggled. "Don't worry, I'll go to sleep now. I'm at a good stopping point anyway."

"Great."

"How are you doing on the countermeasures? Getting somewhere?"

"I'm done, actually."

"Huh?" She blinked at me with surprise.

I averted my gaze. "I have what I need. All that's left is to put together a script."

"I'm so jealous... You have such a decisive personality no matter

what you do.”

“I don’t have the free time to focus everything I have on school.”

“Don’t you have that backwards?”

“Not to me.”

Unlike Yume’s, my life revolved around my reading time, not school.

“Uh-huh... Well, I guess it’s good that you work fast. I can already guess that you have some kind of weird idea thought up. I wonder how the organizing committee will react.”

“I don’t really care how they react.” *I really don’t.*

I moved to leave, since I didn’t have any more business in her room. But then I remembered I had something more to say.

“Hey.”

“Hm? What?”

“If they like the countermeasure proposal, you should say that it was your idea.”

“Uh...what?” Yume blinked at me, dumbfounded.

She was confused, but it was different than before. This time, there was suspicion and animosity mixed in. I understood her feelings, but I still left.

I was two steps down the stairs when Yume called out to me. “H-Hey, wait! What’s the big idea?!”

I turned around and put my finger to my lips. Our parents were asleep in their room downstairs. Yume covered her mouth in a panic before continuing in a more subdued voice.

“What are you talking about? Why should I take credit for your—”

“Cause it’s a pain.”

I left her with those words and continued downstairs. Perhaps out of consideration for our sleeping parents, Yume did not chase after me, allowing me to descend into the darkness of the first floor without any worry.

On the day of our presentation, Yume and I changed into the costumes borrowed from Madoka-san after classes ended, and walked with Minami-san to the A/V room.

“Man, everyone loved the costumes! We’ve got this in the bag!” Minami-san confidently exclaimed.

“There was almost *too* much praise. It almost doesn’t feel real,” Yume retorted.

“I swear, you really do look cute! Have some confidence! I’m gonna be mad if you don’t!”

“Why would you get mad?”

“Well, to be honest, you look good too, Irido-kun,” she said, turning to me. “I’m conflicted about genuinely complimenting you

though..."

"Thanks."

I really wished she wouldn't make a huge fuss. Walking around school in hakama was already enough to draw attention. The only silver lining here was that there weren't many people around now that school was over for the day.

Whether I looked good or not, Yume *did* look good. Objectively speaking. Her long black hair and calm facial expression combined with her slender body was a perfect match for traditional Japanese clothes. None of the other girls would pull these off as well, I was certain, so using Yume as the model might've been false advertising. Well, the outfits themselves were eye-catching enough.

All that was left was...

"Minami-san," I nonchalantly whispered.

"Hm?"

"I have a favor to ask."

"You do? That's a first."

"If you're asked about who came up with the countermeasures for potential problems, say that it was Yume instead of me."

"Uh...why?" Her reaction was the exact same as Yume's, right down to the dubious look she shot me from under furrowed eyebrows. "You only have to do it if they like the idea. Otherwise, you can say it was all me."

"What? Is this one of those times when you try to hide how competent you actually are?"

"I just don't want to stand out too much. All that'll do is increase the number of annoyances coming my way. I've already talked to Yume about this."

Yume glanced over at us, looking displeased. She must've overheard some of our conversation. To be fair, I *had* talked to Yume about this. The only thing was that I hadn't given her a chance to respond. Well, whatever. I still didn't want my name anywhere near my contributions.

"Well, I guess I can do that," Minami-san reluctantly agreed. "But that's only *if* I get asked, right?"

"Yeah. Thanks." Now that everything was all set, I could just sit back and leisurely go through the presentation as a bystander.

When we arrived, we opened the door to a dim room, which was filled with a strange atmosphere. Many students from other classes were also present, all wearing the costumes that their classes were planning to wear for the cultural festival. The haunted house representatives were wearing zombie makeup, while the escape room ones were wearing *Scream* masks. At the very least, it seemed that everyone had come with the same idea—make an impactful first

impression with their appearance.

The other four classes that wanted to do cosplay cafés were no different. Looking at their costumes, I could figure out what they were planning. Two of them had come in maid and butler costumes, as expected. One of the other classes seemed to have some kind of fantasy anime theme while the other class... I wasn't sure, but it looked like Dracula or something. *Are they only going to serve tomato juice?*

There were also some classes that were doing things outside of my expectations, but I didn't anticipate any problems. Yume stole the gaze of everyone in the room as soon as she entered in her brilliant Taisho outfit. I knew it—the outfit exuded beauty. The fact that she was drawing the gaze of both the guys and girls was proof that we'd chosen correctly.

"They're looking at us," Yume whispered.

"Irido-kun doesn't seem to care at all."

We walked through the sea of stares to our seats. From the looks of things, it seemed that the student council and PTA had yet to arrive. But just as I thought that, the door opened, and in they came. As expected, the one leading the charge was the vice president, Suzuri Kurenai. She emitted a commanding presence, demanding not just silence, but a silence so strong that it felt like even breathing was a sin.

Though she may have had the appearance of a small, young girl, she naturally drew attention. Despite that, there was something else that made others unable to look away—she was wearing a military-esque costume, her dress designed to resemble an army jacket. Combined with her commanding charisma and her feminine charm, it was a match made in heaven.

"Cute..." Yume reflexively whispered.

Internally, I was thinking that Yume was not very quick on the uptake. In short, the vice president was making a statement that classes had to do better than what she had on. As the other members filed in and sat in their seats, she remained standing at the podium in front of the projector screen.

"Well then," she said, smacking the baton in her hand against the podium. She almost felt like a real soldier. "Our school considers the cultural festival an integral part of its curriculum. As such, its purpose is to foster the abilities of students. You might ask, 'What ability?' The answer is quite simple. It's to have the knowledge and strength to become whatever you want to. I believe the power to grab your dreams is what defines one's abilities." Her passionate speech echoed through the silent room. "Show me your dreams, no matter how imperfect. I want to see how marvelous that which you desire is, and

how you expect to obtain it. I promise you that so long as you show your ideals, this school will support you with everything it has.” She said all of this with a calm smile. It was hard to believe that she was only a second-year. “Now then, let’s get right into it.”

“Pardon my question. I fear I’m a novice in this subject, and am less knowledgeable than I’d like to be, but...” After the first class finished their presentation on their maid café, the vice president immediately grabbed the microphone. “Perhaps you can enlighten me as to what type of maid your proposed café will focus on?”

“Huh?”

“There are numerous types of maids, ranging from classic to modern Akihabara maids. As far as I can tell from your presentation, it seems you are leaning towards the Akihabara maid style, and yet, the costumes you brought have long skirts, which greatly resemble the Victorian style. I cannot deny that it gives a very confusing impression. Perhaps the thought process was to make the skirts longer so as to circumvent any criticism from the PTA?”

All the presenter could do was stare like a deer in headlights at the rapid-fire questions and statements from the vice president.

“Oh god...” Minami-san groaned.

I was right there with her. I hadn’t expected this at all. I’d predicted surface-level feedback, but she was *really* digging deep.

“I-Irido-kun... I’m starting to freak out! We’re gonna be okay, right?! All I have to do is follow the script, right?!”

“It’ll be okay. As long as those are the kinds of questions she’s asking...”

But honestly, she was even more eccentric than she looked. She had the potential to completely blow past any expectations I had and ask something completely out of left field. Sure enough, the next class that presented was also torn to bits by the vice president, and then...it was our turn.

“And like so, our class is aiming to provide an opportunity to experience the timeless Taisho era, using a café as the medium.”

So far so good. As much as Minami-san had freaked out, she seemed to have calmed down and was speaking clearly at a speed that made it easy to catch every last word. Everyone was seriously taking notes, aside from the vice president, who was wearing a suspicious smile, and the treasurer, who had absolutely no presence.

As the models, Yume and I stood to the side. I could tell the judges were interested. The background research on the Taisho era that Yume had done until late last night really helped raise the level of our presentation’s accuracy. It was an invaluable weapon in showing

how our class's café would be very appropriate for a cultural festival. Her seriousness actually paid off for once, despite how often she went in circles.

Our presentation had a lot more polish than the other classes. Even through an unbiased lens, our idea seemed to have no shot of failing. Save for any problems, the path to approval was smooth sailing. But that was only *if* there were no problems. It had been my job to make sure to squash any and all issues.

"Next, I'd like to talk about the countermeasures we have prepared to deal with any potential problems," Minami-san said.

As soon as the slide changed, the expressions of all the judges changed. No other presentation had even touched on this topic.

"Since general admission allows the public to visit, there is a possibility that there may be an influx of customers who may try to excessively approach the students serving them. For the most part, we'd immediately change their server to someone with more experience in customer service. The bigger problem is how to identify potential problematic customers beforehand. To that end, we would like to propose the following system."

The slide changed, eliciting whispers and murmurs not only from the judges, but the students in the room too.

"During the cultural festival, we will flag any customers who cause trouble and share them in real time through the cloud. This will help to ensure timely responses from all classes. In doing so, we can stay one step ahead and prevent such problems from happening in the first place."

This was the very definition of a wiki guide. After identifying a problematic person, students would be able to share their appearance, their destination, and what had been done to deal with them. With modern technology, we could easily create a database for free. This wouldn't just be an individual thing or even a class thing—it'd be schoolwide. This was the method for dealing with troublemakers that I'd come up with after receiving a hint from Isana.

It wasn't perfect, but that was to be expected. Even so, showing how well we could defend our idea was one of the linchpins that determined the success or failure of our plan.

"That concludes our presentation. Are there any questions?"

As soon as these words left Minami-san's mouth, *she* moved—just as I had anticipated. Suzuri Kurenai, the vice president of the student council and genius of the school, took the microphone and looked at Minami-san.

"Sharing information in real time regarding troublemakers and preventing problems from happening in the first place is certainly a wonderful idea. However, I have two or three concerns that I can

think of from a practicality standpoint.”

“What would those be?” Minami-san replied immediately.

Everything would be okay. All she had to do was read from the script.

“First, I am concerned that this may slow down service to customers. After all, you’d have to confirm whether the individual has been reported or not before you can begin serving them. Adding an extra step to the process will increase the burden on the staff. Also, I’m somewhat hesitant about demanding implementation of something so sophisticated to a process that has traditionally been simple.”

“Well...” Minami-san began flipping through the script, looking for the answer list I’d included. Yume looked at her with worry. “Oh, we actually have a plan for that as well!”

“Please explain.”

“We will limit the amount of customers inside at one time. That will lessen the burden on the staff.”

“I see. That’s a very reasonable plan. However, how would you deal with a sudden influx of customers? Would that not create a long line?”

“A long line is exactly what we want.”

“It is?”

“When the line is long, we’ll be able to check for any potentially unwanted guests. If the line of people waiting exceeds a certain number, we will implement a time limit for customers to increase the speed of getting them in and out.”

“Two birds, one stone...or rather, it’s three birds, one stone. Long lines attract people as well. Intentionally having customers wait is risky, but overall, it is very clever.” The judges began murmuring among themselves, but still, the vice president didn’t stop her questions. “My next point of concern is that this plan is unable to address the first instance of problems. Since your strategy relies on potential troublemakers being marked beforehand, it doesn’t account for people who start making trouble in your café. Am I right in interpreting this as you permitting the first instance of poor behavior?”

She’s really pressing us this hard? Sure, one could interpret things the same as she had—that the first instance was unavoidable, but...

“No, we have a plan for that as well.”

“Interesting.”

“Every year, guests must have their invitations checked at the gate, and must sign the guest list. We will begin by marking those who are rude to the receptionists or seem exceptionally restless and disruptive.”

“Hm, I see you’ve done your homework. You’re right that

invitations are checked every year. I don't think your plan is impossible. However, you may find yourself having to check an extremely high number of people, and you'll have to note their physical characteristics. Or are you trying to say that students there should try to remember all that? I imagine that entering all that information will take up quite a bit of time."

"Oh no, there's no need to remember or even record anything."

"Hm?"

"Everyone will have their picture taken as a commemoration of their visit."

"Oh?" The vice president's eyes narrowed, and the edge of her lips slightly curled as if she'd found her prey.

Minami-san didn't seem to notice and continued reading the answers I'd prepared. "We will take their pictures at reception and enter them separated by categories such as hairstyle or physique if they seem problematic. This will make identification much quicker."

"So in essence, you will be deceiving innocent people while making a blacklist."

"We won't be deceiving anyone."

"Why's that?"

"The school has reserved the right to take pictures during the cultural festival for the purpose of advertisements, as well as appropriate management purposes. Visitors agree to these terms when they sign the guest list. The pictures can, of course, be used for the school's website and the school newspaper, but making guests aware that they are being photographed can also be used as a deterrent of any potential problems. Our proposal is merely an extension of that."

The judges' eyes all widened with surprise, but the vice president and treasurer's faces stayed the same. Thanks to Kawanami, I'd gotten pictures of the guest list and the invitations, letting me check for the information I needed. The fastest way to capture someone's appearance was with pictures. But you couldn't just take pictures of people without their consent, so I wanted something that would make it look like they'd given us their permission.

There were a ton of pictures with people's faces unblurred on the school's homepage. It stood to reason that they'd given their permission in some shape or form, but this was just for the advertising side of things. It wasn't as if they gave their permission to be photographed for surveillance purposes.

But that problem was solved by the "appropriate management purposes" line. As soon as I saw that, I realized that at the very least, this idea could theoretically work.

The vice president chuckled. "What deceptive logic you use."

But she didn't deny that it made sense. Minami-san didn't so much

as flinch at the vice president's piercing glare. She had nerves of steel. From the bottom of my heart, I was so glad we hadn't gone with Yume as the presenter.

"I understand. I see that you've removed any potential flaws in your plan. That being said, this isn't a plan that works if your classmates are the only ones involved. If anything, this sounds like organizational committee territory. I'm not sure if the school will give the green light, though I will take this idea as a potential suggestion."

"Thank you," Minami-san said.

That's good enough. It wasn't a problem if they didn't adopt our plan. The only important thing was that we showed them how much we had thought about taking care of problems. It was beginning to feel like we'd weathered the storm. I exhaled slightly. It was a good thing that I'd thought about this so hard. I'd been right in guessing that this eccentric vice president would latch onto things that most normal people wouldn't.

"I have just one last question." It wasn't until then that I realized the vice president had yet to let go of the microphone. "Who was the one who came up with this proposal?"

"Oh, it was..." Minami-san shot a gaze at Yume in preparation to say her name.

Good. It was just as I'd planned. This was precisely why I'd talked to the both of them about this beforehand. I didn't want to be highlighted whatsoever. I was ready to work from the shadows...the shadow cast by the bright light that was Yume. The shadows were where I felt at peace.

Just as Minami-san was about to say Yume's name, the unexpected happened.

"Mizuto Irido," Yume practically screamed. I stared at her, speechless. "He's the one who came up with this plan." She gently pushed me forward.

Wh-What the hell are you thinking?! Minami-san let out a sigh as if to say, "I told you this would happen." *She knew?! Why? Why?! This could've been your chance to take all the glory!* I didn't have so much as a chance to deny what Yume had said. The vice president's eyes had already fallen on me.

"You *did*?"

Now that it'd come to this, I had to accept it. "I came up with it, but that's *all* I did."

"I have this quote that I'm fond of," she started all of a sudden, much to my displeasure. "It's something that the father of Mario, Shigeru Miyamoto, said: 'A good idea is something that does not solve just one single problem, but rather solves multiple problems at once.' Don't you think it's a very clear definition?" *What is she trying to say?*

“In your case, you took three problems—low skill of staff, advertisement, potential problems from customers—and you solved them all with one fell stroke. Some testing will be needed to see if it’s truly effective, however, this is unmistakably an *idea*. You can’t spell ‘ideal’ without ‘idea.’” *Ideal...* “Thank you. You’ve shown me your ideal.” She then began clapping, which caused a chain reaction in which the judges began clapping too, followed by the students.

Everyone in the room was clapping for me. Yume and Minami-san held hands with joy. *Right. This basically means that our presentation succeeded. Of course they’d be happy.* But I...felt nothing. No matter how much applause I got, I felt absolutely nothing.

The word “ideal” began echoing in my head. *I’m sorry vice president, but I don’t have the faintest idea what my ideal is.*



Ultimately, out of the five cosplay cafés, the only ones approved were our class's and one of the maid cafés. Apparently, their class had a very passionate maid otaku who was able to recite the history of maids. He'd been very passionate about how appropriate a maid café was for the cultural festival.

"Hell yeah!"

"Amazing job, guys!"

"You beat an upperclassman?!"

"Holy crap!"

Our classmates showered us with praise when we came back with the results. Minami-san and Yume sheepishly took their compliments and celebrated with them. They even told them about how the vice president had complimented me, for some reason.

"Nice!"

"Never doubted you!"

I was showered with praise. Was celebrating our victories like this, with people who were striving towards the same goal, supposed to be part of the classic high school experience? If so...

Yume nonchalantly approached me in the midst of all the praise I was getting. Her lips curled into a smile as if she was about to tell me a secret. "It's not too bad to be part of the group every now and then, right?"

Suddenly I remembered something from the past. *When our relationship was on the rocks, you tried to approach me, and I gave you a harsh response. So this time...*

"Yeah. Maybe," I said half-heartedly.

At the very least, I'd grown enough to say as much.

As I staggered towards the school gates, I noticed a girl leaning against them, who then turned and waved at me. Isana Higashira. *I don't remember planning to meet up or anything.* I curiously approached her and saw that she was grinning.

"Good work today, Mizuto-kun," she said, looking at me.

"Didn't I say you should go home without me?"

"You did, but I waited anyway." She giggled. "How girlfriend-like, wouldn't you agree?"

"Can't imagine a girl trying to hook me up with someone else saying something like that, but here we are."

She was making me start to think that Kawanami's accusation hadn't been as far-fetched as I'd thought. But then again, she was free to enjoy the situation however she liked.

I began walking and Isana followed, staying by my side. It was the perfect distance for a couple to be walking at, but this was just our

everyday. We'd become accustomed to this, walking the painfully familiar path back home.

"I heard about your huge contribution to your class's presentation, Mizuto-kun!"

Usually, she would've started talking about new releases, but instead, she brought up something different. I was a little disappointed. I'd completely expected Isana to be uninterested in the cultural festival. *I guess with the entire school getting into the mood, there's no avoiding this topic, no matter who I talk to.*

"Who did you hear that from?" I asked.

"Yume-san! She also explained that you tried to pretend to be a puppet master and stay in the shadows!"

"Yeah. Well, that didn't work out," I said, mocking myself.

But I'd gone through it so many times. In society, you'd usually humbly play down your efforts. You'd do that over and over again like some kind of robot. But still...

Isana snorted ostentatiously. As usual, she was getting a big head.

"You failed to hide your true power, lol. You failed to act like a light novel protagonist, lol. So lame. Lol! Lmao, even!"

"Tone it down. You won't like the retaliation that's gonna come."

"*You're* the one who should— OW! My temples! Please don't grind your knuckles into my temple! It's so archaic! Your punishment method is very archaic!"

I was really hopeless. I felt so much, so much more comfortable getting riled up by this idiot than being praised by my classmates. I was really hopelessly incompatible with whatever was considered the standard high school experience.

“Hello?”

Summer break was a time of nothingness. I watched the fireworks by myself in this deserted countryside shrine. The world kept spinning long after we broke up. It was almost like the past year had been fake. I looked at my phone. You were just a call away. Calling you would have been so, so easy—but I couldn’t do it.

You’d already gone so far from me, to a place I couldn’t reach even by phone. If possible, I wished that it were all fake—this past year and the time I’d spent with you. I didn’t want to know that the end was coming.

Yume Irido

Now that every class had decided what they’d be doing for the cultural festival, everyone had begun preparations for real, and our class was no exception. We started to put together decorations to fit the Taisho Roman theme and practiced cooking the items on our menu.

Unfortunately, due to our responsibilities as committee members, Mizuto and I were in and out of meetings and working on other miscellaneous tasks, so we were too busy to help our class, despite having put in so much work to get the idea approved.

Instead, as committee members, we worked as the facilitators between our class and the organizing committee. We also made invitations and posters to advertise to the nearby general populace. In essence, we had to take care of a lot of smaller things for the festival.

“How’re things going?”

“Wah!” I’d been so focused on the laptop screen as I worked that I jumped a little from the serene voice that suddenly whispered into my ear.

I turned around to see the vice president, Suzuri Kurenai, softly giggling.

“S-Senpai... Do you need something?”

“Apologies for the surprise. Everyone else is concentrating, so I didn’t want to speak in a loud voice.”

That’s not true. She just enjoys teasing people. Kurenai-senpai was known as the greatest prodigy the school’d ever seen. She had so much charisma that even third-years respected her, but despite all that, she was surprisingly friendly. In fact, these days, she tried to chat

with me often, which was probably a result of my outburst at the presentation. That being said, maybe it was all in my head, because she really was friendly all around.

Kurenai-senpai bent over and peered at my screen. "How's the debugging going?"

"Not too bad. There haven't been any noticeable bugs so far."

Currently, I was testing out the system that we'd proposed to prevent troublemakers. We had several distinctive students go around school and instructed committee members to take pictures of them and then enter them into the system. Then, we'd predict their movements. While it may have been a convoluted game of tag, it was perfect for testing whether or not the system worked.

I wasn't very familiar with computers, but since I had come up with the idea, I was assigned to help with debugging the system. Mizuto was at a desk not too far away, quietly doing the same.

"Yep, looks like things are going well." She nodded at the screen. "Not that I had any doubt, considering Joe set it all up."

"Who?"

"Our treasurer. He doesn't stand out much, but he's very talented, especially when it comes to computers."

She turned around, glancing at the end of the long table before the white board. Sitting there was a guy who had naturally curly hair and wore unfashionable glasses, silently typing away at his keyboard.

Then I remembered his actual name: Joji Haba. I had no idea she called him by a nickname. Huh. I wouldn't be surprised if wherever she went, he wasn't too far behind. I wondered if they were friends.

"I'd say we are."

"Huh?" *She read my mind?!*

Kurenai-senpai chuckled again. "It's rather amusing how you wear your heart on your sleeve. Oh, I should add that, unfortunately, we are *just* friends. For now."

"You're way too perceptive..." *Hm? What does she mean by "unfortunately" and "for now"? No way. Does she...?*

"Who knows?" Kurenai-senpai winked as she flashed me a cryptic smile. "Well, keep at it," she said before going to check on other members.

No, seriously. What is your relationship?! I need to know! I couldn't help but follow her with my eyes as she walked away. In contrast to her strong presence, she was somehow still so *delicate*. If there really was something between the two of them, then they'd be one of the most unexpected couples out there. But at the same time, it felt like she had just been teasing me. *Ugh, which is it?!*

Just as I was getting worked up by all of this, someone called out to me. When I turned around, I saw that Mizuto had walked over.

“Y-Yeah?”

“Is it just me, or are there more entry errors on the second tab than the others?”

“Huh? Uh...yeah. Now that you mention it. I wonder if the person isn’t paying too much attention.”

“They might just not understand the UI that well. Maybe it’s worth it to try and simplify it more.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll collect some data and make a report.”

Mizuto nodded before returning to his seat, hard at work as usual. I hadn’t seen him interact with any of the committee members aside from me. Oh, and Kurenai-senpai, since she pestered him often. This was normal—Mizuto was slow to warm up to others. But it felt like such a waste, after all the praise he had received.

Kogure Kawanami

“Okay, Ko-kun, open wide!” a sickeningly sweet voice rang out.

Akatsuki, tilting her head and smiling, shoved an orange slice into my mouth. I shot her a quick glare before she continued speaking.

“How is it?”

“Hm... A little too sweet.”

“Just how you like it!”

“What good does it do if it only suits *my* taste?!”

I was in the middle of taste-testing items our class was planning to serve at the cultural festival. Apparently, the typical Western food items associated with the Taisho era were curry, croquettes, and pork cutlets, but we were restricted from using open flames and oil at school. So we tried going in a different direction instead.

We took out the canned fruit and threw them in seltzer water to make some fruit-infused sparkling water. We were also thinking about preparing sandwiches with prepared ingredients, such as ham, lettuce, and scrambled eggs. The idea was to make a menu focused on lighter items like snacks.

“Is there really any point in only taste-testing *this*?” I asked.

“Aren’t cafés supposed to focus more on black tea or coffee?”

“Yeah, but Kine-chan got real fussy about it. She’s grinding the beans in the home ec room right now.”

“*That’s* where she’s starting from? I guess perfectionism’s par for the course for a tea ceremony club member...” *Wait, what does coffee even have to do with tea?*

Turns out perfectionists were more common than I’d thought. I looked around the classroom. We’d decided that we’d get some café-styled wallpaper so that we could make the Taisho immersion stronger. That being said, there were a *lot* of different styles we could choose from. The members were still fighting over whether to go with

a wooden panel or a brick look. I looked towards the blackboard and saw others using it to discuss seat placement.

According to Irido-san's research, in the Taisho era, intellectuals would gather at a salon, which eventually became the first café. The discussion of whether to follow that or follow the theme of a more modern café was still ongoing as well. I kinda enjoyed the atmosphere. It almost felt like playing Minecraft, using the classroom as the subject. But just like with romance, I preferred to observe.

I took another spoonful of the fruit punch, continuing to enjoy my lawful slacking off.

"Oh?" Akatsuki said. "Higashira-san?"

"Hm?"

I turned around and saw a girl nervously peeking inside. It really was Isana Higashira. She seemed to be scanning the classroom for someone—well, obviously for Irido. We approached her.

"Irido's not here."

"H-How did you know my objective?!"

"Why else would you come to our classroom?" Akatsuki asked dryly.

Higashira stretched upwards to see over Akatsuki's head in an attempt to take another look into the classroom. "Do you know where he is? At this rate, the hustle and bustle of the cultural festival will literally kill me!"

"Why are you so proud of slacking off? Just help out, for a change."

"Exactly," I agreed with Akatsuki. "Doesn't your class need help?"

She confidently chuckled. "Do you truly think that they would have assigned any tasks to *me*?"

In other words, she wanted Irido to pay attention to her since she didn't have a place in her own class.

"Listen," I said, mildly annoyed, "Irido's with the other committee members. He's busier than us, so don't bother him."

"Oh, I see... How disappointing. I have no desire to cause him any trouble." Higashira slumped her shoulders.

I was starting to feel bad for her, but then again, it was her own fault for not making any friends in her class. The cultural festival was the perfect chance to get closer to them. If only she hadn't run away.

"Oh, I know. Higashira-san, do you wanna try some sparkling water? We're doing a taste test."

"M-May I?"

"Of course! No biggie. His feedback is useless anyway."

"I am not surprised."

"Why are you so rude to me but so nice to others?!"

Just as Akatsuki began to beckon Higashira in, we heard a voice.

“Hm? Isana?”

“Mizuto-kun!”

As soon as *he* appeared, she spun around and ran up to him like a dog who’d found its master.

“I thought you were busy with committee work.”

“I’m done for the day. I was gonna check on things before coming to get you.”

“What a coincidence! I just arrived after being unable to withstand the awkwardness of not having a place in my own classroom!”

“Oh. Well, sorry I’m late.”

I could almost see her tail wagging. She really had become attached to him. Ever since the classroom confession, she hadn’t seemed to pay too much attention to the gazes of others either.

I slightly raised my hand towards Irido. “Hey. Where’s Irido-san?”

“No clue. Probably still working.” I was a little surprised—his tone made it sound like he didn’t care at all.

Irido put his hand on Higashira’s shoulder. “Doesn’t look like there’s anything to do, so let’s get going. The library’s closed, so do you wanna come over?”

“Yes, I would! I will grab my things!”

“I’ll go with you.”

Just as he was leaving, he turned back to us as if he’d forgotten something. “Later, Kawanami, Minami-san.”

“Yeah...later.”

“See ya, Irido-kun!”

Irido nodded and disappeared into the noisy hallway with Higashira. After seeing them off, Akatsuki and I made eye contact.

“So...”

“Yeah...”

The plan was to have the two siblings get closer to one another while working on the committee, but...if anything, it felt like they’d grown more distant.

Isana Higashira

As soon as I entered Mizuto-kun’s room, I made my way to his bed, sat down, and removed my socks. He was no longer surprised by my selfish habits. As such, he casually placed his bag on a hanger and loosened his tie.

“Phew. Finally, I can relax,” he said.

“Are you especially busy as a committee member?”

“The job itself isn’t too bad, but the vice president keeps trying to talk to me. I can’t stand people like that.”

“By ‘vice president,’ you mean that of the student council?”

“Yeah. I’m sure she means well, but I just can’t deal with her.”

It was rare for Mizuto-kun to speak like this. He tended not to pay anyone mind aside from Yume-san.

“That sounds quite difficult. I, on the other hand, have absolutely no tasks entrusted to me, so I’m completely free and full of energy!”

“No need to act tough. You should try and help at least a little bit, or you’re gonna get stressed out.”

“That’s true... I certainly do feel somewhat guilty.”

“Can you even imagine how crappy it’s gonna feel when you wear your class’s T-shirt after having contributed absolutely nothing?”

“Ugh... Class T-shirts aren’t merely a legend? We really do live in a society, huh?! I was confident that I’d avoid that by going to a prep school!”

“We may be at prep school, but it’s still high school. At least they take the cost of the shirts out of the class’s budget, so you don’t actually have to pay for them.”

“Are you not fond of class T-shirts either?”

“Of course not. Why would I like something that’s manifested by peer pressure?”

“I am in full agreement! What am I to do when I already feel little to no affinity for my class?”

“They can try and make it seem as if everyone’s all buddy-buddy with the shirts, but it’s all superficial,” Mizuto lightly exhaled.

Hm...he certainly does seem fatigued. “Mizuto-kun, if you are lacking energy, perhaps I could share some of mine with you?”

“Huh? How?”

“Come right this way.”

I called Mizuto-kun over, placing him at the edge of his bed, his back to me. Next, I laid my hands on his shoulders and exerted pressure.

“Shoulder rub!”

“A massage? *That’s* your big idea?”

“How is it?”

“Hm...”

“Are you conscious of my breasts? That is, the ones right behind you. They could make contact with the back of your head at any given second, you know?”

“*That’s* what you’re talking about? I couldn’t care less.”

“Is that so? Then, you claim that my breasts are not stimulating for you?”

“Yeah, in the sense that I’m tired of how they’re always the punch line.”

Good grief. How blissful a life he leads. Did he really not want to feel them even once? When he turned me down, he’d stated that it

wasn't because he found me unattractive, so he must have been at least *somewhat* interested.

I started up the conversation again with a random topic while I rubbed his shoulders. "Your class is doing a cosplay café, right?"

I'd heard from Minami-san that their presentation had been successful.

"Yeah, *they* are," he said in a relaxed position. "*I'm* not."

"I saw the pictures! The costume suited you very well!"

"That was a huge pain in the ass..." So he *did* view it as a tiring experience. I'd witnessed him being fawned over and had assumed that was the case.

"I'm envious that your class came up with such an interesting idea. My class is not very motivated, resulting in something rather boring."

"All this from the least motivated person of them all?" Mizuto-kun quipped.

"You're not wrong. However, if we were doing a cute cosplay café, I would undoubtedly be much more interested."

"You? Cosplay? In front of other people? We're still talking about *you*, right?"

"Indeed, though perhaps your doubt isn't unfounded. Cosplaying in front of a large group of people while also serving customers would prove to be quite the herculean task. Hm..." I began thinking about what I was and wasn't capable of. "Mizuto-kun..." I leaned forward, peering at Mizuto's face from above.

"Hm?" He looked up at me, our gazes locking.

"Would it be all right if I tried cosplaying here?"

"Here? What cosplay? I don't have any costumes."

"Oh, it's all right. I would simply need to peruse the items in your drawers."

"In *my* drawers? How about no, pervert."

"I promise not to touch any of your delicacies! Simply lend me this—that will suffice!" I tugged at the dress shirt he was currently wearing.

He gave me an even more suspicious look. "My shirt? Well, I guess I *do* have a spare in my drawers..."

"I've been interested in trying your clothes on for some time now!"

"It's kinda nasty how openly horny you are."

"I no longer feel that way—I swear!" I protested. "Wearing a guy's shirt is something that every girl wishes to try!"

If I were truly lustful, I would have specifically requested the shirt he had on right now. After all, it was covered in his scent! *Oh my god. Maybe I am "nasty."*

“Isn’t that only when they have nothing else to change into?”

“Think about it this way: what clothes would you offer me if there was a sudden downpour and I was drenched?”

“If that happened...I’d probably lend you Yume’s clothes.”

“Precisely! I won’t have another opportunity like this!”

Somehow or other, I was visiting a boy’s room. I’d be lying if I claimed not to have even the smallest hope of trying this! I’d even purposely “forget” to bring an umbrella on days when there was a chance of rain! But after giving it some thought, it never would’ve really worked out! I was at an impasse!

“With that in mind, I thought this would be the best time to be bold—and cosplay.”

“There’s not even a trace of emotion in your words. But...fine. Just for a little. I’ll leave, so you can change—”

“Oh, no need. Turning your back will suffice.”

“Huh?”

I felt bad about kicking him out of his own room. Also, I had become aware that I was, in fact, rather lustful. I didn’t trust myself to be alone right now.

“Pardon me,” I said, halting his shoulder rub in order to go peruse his drawers.

I opened the top one and found exactly what I was looking for. I pulled out a folded dress shirt and returned to the bed with it before I started undoing the buttons of my shirt.

“I will begin to change now, so please...don’t look. Whatever you do, don’t look this way, okay?”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I really won’t,” Mizuto-kun scoffed.

He got up to grab a book from his bag before returning and reading it. Admittedly, I found myself a little irritated that he truly seemed to have no interest in peeping. *Are you really a high school boy?! Have a little taste of high-school-girl-changing ASMR!* I loosened my tie before removing it, then slowly unfastened my shirt’s buttons one after the other, making sure to emphasize the sliding of the fabric and the click of each button.

Oh... Oh my. This is much more heart-racing than I anticipated. There I was, undressing with a guy right in front of me. Sure, I’d almost exposed my bare breasts to him in my half-asleep state during summer vacation, but having my bra exposed to him in a way that he couldn’t see was... Well, it was very uncouth. Heh heh.

I removed both arms from my shirt and tossed it aside. *Oh, a freshly removed woman’s shirt is on his bed! My, this is dirty! Ever so dirty!* I would’ve liked to leave my bra rumpled up somewhere on his bed too, but I used my better judgment and decided against that course of action. *That was close.* I wouldn’t have been able to stop

myself if Mizuto-kun had waited outside his room. He would have witnessed me making a fool of myself as I photographed his bed with nothing on it while my bare breasts bounced around unrestrained.

Anyway, my next task was skirt removal. Just as I went to unzip it, I was struck by a brilliant idea. I glanced at Mizuto-kun, who still showed no sign of looking this way. He continued to silently flip through his book. It didn't seem like he'd slowed down whatsoever to hone in on the sounds coming from behind him. Romantic partner I may not have been, but it wouldn't have hurt him to try and bolster my pride as a girl, would it?

With that in mind, I moved my bottom and positioned my skirt's zipper as close as possible to Mizuto-kun's ear, and then...I unzipped.

"Why did you purposely move closer to me?"

"U-Uh. Huh? Wh-What could you be referring to?"

"Whatever."

I was somehow able to fool him. I'd been a little too ambitious. I removed my skirt and was now wearing nothing but my undergarments. *Wow... I almost want to begin striking erotic poses.* Fortunately, I was just barely able to restrain myself. If I were to do that, I needed to be wearing more alluring undergarments.

Next, I put my arms through both sleeves of his dress shirt. Just as I'd expected, the sleeves went past my hands. *Ehe heh heh. It's so baggy! Oh wait, I should say this out loud.*

"E-Ehe heh heh. It's so baggy!"

But there was no reaction at all from him. *He's ignoring me?! I was used to his cold attitude, but would he have perished if he was a little kind to me on occasion?*

I began fastening the buttons, but stopped when I reached my chest. *How far up should I button this shirt?* Buttoning it all the way would be too tight, but not enough buttons would leave my bra visible. Without a mirror, it was tough to know what the best solution was. I decided I would use my phone as a replacement and began reaching for my bag at the edge of the bed, right next to Mizuto-kun.

"H-Hey!" he said frantically as his eyes landed on me.

That's right. His eyes landed on me. *Huh? Is he currently viewing me in my entirety?* I froze and looked down at my chest. Since I'd wanted a mirror to check whether or not my bra was barely hidden, I'd only buttoned it up to the third button, meaning that my simple pink bra was peeking out.

I practically yelped as I frantically closed the shirt, but that made things worse—now my *panties* were visible too. "Ah!" I quickly closed my legs in order to hide them. I was amazed at how little defense this garment provided. Wearing this in front of anyone but someone you were about to have intimate relations with was impossible!

“You’re all over the place... You only have yourself to blame for this mess.”

“B-But... My undergarments aren’t very cute today...”

“It’d have been more problematic if you’d worn cute underwear on purpose.”

Making the situation more problematic for you is the point, though!

Sure, he’d rejected me, and I supported Yume-san, but I wanted all the chances I could get to fluster him!

I fastened one more button and searched for a safe position.

“What do you think?” I asked.



I slightly raised both baggy sleeves in an attempt to seem dainty. I had secured the length of the shirt now too, so I was able to comfortably reveal a little more of my thighs.

Mizuto-kun looked right at me as if he were watching the news immediately after waking up. "Cute, I guess."

"Oh?! Did you, perhaps, just compliment me?!"

"I know that you'll get a big head if I say it, so I usually don't, but honestly, I do think you're pretty cute," he said before returning to his book.

Uh... That's odd. Your words and your actions are not matching up. I got on all fours and approached Mizuto-kun.

"Um... By 'cute,' do you mean in the way that a pet is cute?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"That's horrible! That is not the type of compliment I'm looking for! I want you to be more physically aroused!"

"That's really what you want?" He turned around and looked me straight in the eyes, not breaking eye contact once. It was as if he was looking into my soul.

"W-Well... Uh... I-I'm not quite prepared..." I reflexively looked away and retreated.

Mizuto-kun let out a short snort tinged with contempt. "Wimp."

Excuse me?! "That's even worse! I don't want to hear that from a boy who'd turn down a girl for some incomprehensible reason and then ignore her advances!"

"You're not wrong about it being incomprehensible, but also, don't call it that."

Hmph! At this rate, you will never get on good terms with Yume-san, no matter how long you try!

Yume Irido

Preparations for the cultural festival were steadily progressing. The clock was ticking and the school's atmosphere was beginning to reflect that. The areas that were usually dull in appearance had become brighter and more expressive. It even had *me* feeling festive.

Today, the committee members had a very important job: we had to start working on the school gate's arch. We moved out the desks that we'd been using from the conference room and began covering the cardboard boxes laid out on the floor with paint.

Working on the floor hurt my back, so I found a good stopping point and took the opportunity to stretch and go to the bathroom. I let a girl that I'd become acquainted with know and headed out.

Signs that classes were going to use during the festival lined the hallways, which bustled with so much activity that I could hardly

believe classes had ended for the day. A myriad of voices rang out from all the classrooms. One class was even holding a karaoke contest, for some reason. The atmosphere that had developed during this time had people acting strangely.

I looked outside into the courtyard and saw people practicing a dance as I entered the girl's bathroom.

"Hello there."

"O-Oh. Hello, senpai."

Kurenai-senpai was at the sink. Her makeup pouch was on the counter and her hair straightener was plugged in. *I guess she's fixing her makeup?* As I entered a stall, I thought about how, despite giving off such an otherworldly vibe, at her core, she was a normal girl too. *I guess that should've been obvious.*

After finishing my business, I went to the sink, and to my surprise, she was still there. The makeup she had out shouldn't have taken that much time to put on. I was a little confused, but I shrugged it off and washed my hands next to her.

I checked myself in the mirror while I was there and saw that my ponytail was falling out, so I took out my hair tie to fix it.

"Would you like a comb?" Kurenai-senpai asked, extending her hand towards me.

She caught me off guard, but I recovered quickly. "Thank you," I said as I accepted it from her.

As I began combing my hair, she suddenly began speaking again. "It seems you've gotten used to the committee."

"Oh, yes. I'm shy, honestly, but everyone's been so friendly. That really helped."

"Glad to hear that. I wish that your counterpart could do the same."

"My counterpart? Do you mean Mizuto?"

"Yes! Your...older brother?"

"Younger."

I wasn't as against the idea as before, but I still had no desire to be his little sister. There was no way I could ever handle calling him "onii-chan" again. I'd be going past my limits. I'd have a heart attack!

"I've been trying to get better acquainted with your younger brother by chatting with him, but it's turning out to be much more difficult than I expected."

"Huh? B-By 'better acquainted,' do you mean..." I unconsciously stopped brushing my hair.

This didn't slip past her. She chuckled. "Of course, I mean as the next student council president. It's not every day that you come across a student as excellent as he."

"O-Oh. I see..."

That freaked me out! Her words always feel more cryptic than they need to be!

"It seems that he's created a wall between himself and others. I get the impression that he's uninterested in others. I can deeply relate to that."

"Huh?"

"Effective communication is key to efficient work. I'd very much like it if you became the bridge that brings him into the fold," she said, sticking her hand out right as I finished combing my hair. "You have beautiful hair. I'm jealous." She smiled, accepted the comb from me, and then left the bathroom with her makeup pouch.

I mulled over her words as I watched her go. Mizuto did emanate an aloof aura, but what exactly about him could Kurenai-senpai—the very same Kurenai-senpai that kept trying to chat up an underclassman she didn't even know—have in common with him? So cryptic. I had no clue what was going on in her head.

I couldn't imagine that Mizuto would willingly become a part of the group, making Kurenai-senpai's request difficult. But after seeing him hang out with Higashira-san, I couldn't say for certain that he *hated* being around others.

Plus, I remembered the way he'd looked as he sat at that deserted shrine while gazing at the night sky. Isolation and loneliness had been carved deep into his heart, but they weren't what he wanted. Maybe the cultural festival would be the perfect chance to break down those walls around him, if even a little.

"Okay."

This was undoubtedly a job for an older sister. *Oh, the things I have to do for my troublesome younger brother...*

"Yume-chan! You free?"

Just as we finished coloring the arch, a certain upperclassman, Yasuda-senpai, approached me. She was tall, cheerful, and easy to talk to. I saw a lot of Akatsuki-san in her, especially with how she could hit it off with anyone—even me. For reference, she was the type of person who would think of you as a friend and start calling you by your first name if you talked to each other for ten minutes.

"Yes, is there something I can help with?"

"I'm going to put a poster up on the bulletin boards. Could you accompany me, youngster? Oof, ouch, owie, my back..."

I giggled at her joke. "Of course, no problem."

Then it hit me—this was my chance. I turned around and saw Mizuto, who'd just finished his section, heading over to the windowsill where he'd left his stuff. *Seriously?! You're trying to go home?!*

"Oh, actually, in that case, we probably need a guy's help."

“True, but I’m not sure if any of them are free.”

I rushed up to Mizuto and lightly tapped him on his shoulder.

“What?” he asked with a sour look on his face, but I wasn’t about to be deterred.

“Are you done with work?”

“Yeah, so I’m going home.”

“Can you stay just a little longer? I need help.”

Mizuto looked at the clock, trying to make it seem as if he was worried about the time, but I knew that he didn’t have any plans. He just wanted to go home as soon as possible. As soon as he realized I wasn’t buying it, Mizuto resigned himself.

“Fine. I finished work earlier than I expected anyway.”

“Thanks! Okay, come with me.” I grabbed him by the arm and brought him back to Yasuda-senpai.

“I got a guy to help. Sorry he’s so scrawny though.”

“Oh, so you’re the famous little brother? Nice to meet you. I’m Yasuda!” she said, brightly smiling and sticking out her hand.

I started freaking out a little. An asocial guy like him would never shake the hand of someone he just met. I needed to do something—

“Nice to meet you, Yasuda-senpai. I’m Irido from class 1-7.”

I was speechless. He may not have been smiling like Yasuda-senpai, but his face had softened a good deal. He even called her by her name *and* shook her hand. *He* did. The same person who pretty much ignored his own relative, Madoka-san, did!

But the unexpected events didn’t end there. While firmly shaking his hand, Yasuda-senpai suddenly brought her face close to Mizuto’s. *Oh no, his personal space!* He preferred people not getting any closer than a meter and a half to him. He even got annoyed when he had to stand close to people in line at a grocery store. I was absolutely certain he would be angry with Yasuda-senpai!

“I’ve heard rumors, but you really are pretty cute. You must be popular with the girls!”

Senpai, no! You can’t tease him like that! He hates that more than anything. I’d thought that in order to ease him into the social circle of the committee members, it’d be best to start with someone bright and friendly, but I hadn’t expected her to invade his personal space so quickly. *This might have the opposite effect! It might make him even more guarded!*

“Oh no, not at all,” he said in a soft tone, faintly smiling.

He’s faintly smiling?! He is?!

“I’m so bad at talking with people that I barely have any friends as it is. I can’t even imagine getting a girlfriend.”

“Really? But, like, I’ve heard rumors. Don’t you have a girlfriend you’re really close with?”

“That one’s *just* a rumor. The girl in question is one of my few friends. My sister can attest to that.”

He’s holding a conversation. He’s amicably holding a conversation.

“Is that girl really not his girlfriend? You can tell me the truth, Yume-chan. It’ll be our secret!”

I was still in so much shock that all I could do was blankly reply, “Yeah, probably...”

What was going on? Were the more intimate types of people actually easier for Mizuto to talk with? Thinking back, Higashira-san had been that way and latched onto him pretty fast. I had the feeling that I’d been pretty aggressive—at least by my standards—when we first met.

It was hard to trust my assumptions, especially since I’d wrongly guessed that Madoka-san had been his first love, but at the very least, it went without saying that Yasuda-senpai’s first impression of him wasn’t bad. She was the mood maker of the committee members, so being on her good side meant that you were guaranteed not to be a loner.

Following the surprisingly easy success of their handshake, we took the posters and left the meeting room to go put up posters around the school. Yasuda-senpai continued to cheerfully chat with Mizuto while we worked.

“Irido-kun, you have good grades, right? How do you study?”

“I cram the night before. I usually take notes during class.”

“You cram *and* you’re second in your grade? Wow, smart people are just built different.”

At first, she’d talked about more surface-level things, but it seemed that she’d begun to be able to dive into more personal topics.

“Oh, right, you and Yume-chan aren’t blood relatives, right? What did you think when you first started living with a girl as cute as she?”

“I was surprised. It was all so sudden—it took everything I had to get used to my new life. Nothing racy ever happened, though.”

“Really? Well, I guess reality is pretty boring.”

He’s better than I at small talk. I had gotten used to it by now, but in the beginning, I stiffened up whenever people asked about us living together. How could he give such a fluid answer? He definitely had the ability to communicate with others; he just didn’t *want* to.

I’d been saved by his ability to communicate countless times when we were dating. So maybe it shouldn’t have come as too much of a surprise that he could speak so easily with an upperclassman he’d just met.

Now that I thought about it, he’d been able to speak with mom, no problem. He had the ability to communicate effectively, so he’d be fine as long as he was in the appropriate situation. I would’ve tried

making this kind of situation happen sooner if I'd known. *But wait...didn't Kurenai-senpai say something about it being difficult to talk to him?*

"A little more to the right."

"Here?"

"Yeah, perfect!"

I felt an itch on the back of my mind, alerting me that I was missing something. Something...strange. Even so, our work continued without any problems.

After putting up the second poster, Yasuda-senpai whispered into my ear.

"Hey, Yume-chan?"

"Yes?"

"I was worried about your younger brother since he always goes straight home, but now that I've talked to him, he's a really good kid. I had no clue! Why does he always leave so promptly?"

"I think it's because the girl he mentioned—his friend—is shy, so she doesn't really have a place in all the hustle and bustle of the cultural festival preparations."

"So he goes to hang out with her to prevent her from feeling lonely? Holy crap, he's so nice! My affection points just skyrocketed!"

Uh, yeah, but I just said that she's his friend, not his girlfriend. I groaned a little. *I guess people really do see them that way.*

"Well then, let's get this done quick so he can get to her!"

"Right..."

Mizuto idly looked at his phone while I was struck by a sense of powerlessness.

"Good work today! See you tomorrow!"

After we finished putting up the posters, we went back to the meeting room to grab our things and said bye to Yasuda-senpai and the other committee members. I watched Mizuto's face while the other committee members were leaving.

"Thanks. Looks like you and Yasuda-senpai really hit it off. I was worried that you might say something rude."

Mizuto glanced at me. "It was easy, since she's not a certain person who can only speak in snark."

"Wait... So am I the only person you talk to like that?"

"No, Kawanami too."

Oh, right. Wow, he got my hopes up. "I wish I could've recorded you peacefully engaging in small talk. I bet if I showed it to Higashira-san, she would've burst out laughing."

"Don't. She'd either never let me live it down, or it'd hurt her. She's a real pain in my ass."

“You’re even worse.”

“Looks like you don’t know what happens when people who are bad at communicating lose all inhibitions.”

Uh-huh, okay. I know you’re talking about me too. I fought back a smile. He might’ve been trying to drive home that I wasn’t as unique to him anymore, and even though this was a conversation that wouldn’t have been possible if we hadn’t broken up, it felt comforting.

“I really should’ve recorded you. When you sulk, I can’t even compare you to Higashira-san. You’re—”

“Sorry, hold that thought,” he said, casually shaking his phone at me.

From what I could tell, something important had come up.

“Higashira-san?”

“Yeah, I’m a little later than I said I’d be,” he said as he began calling her, bringing his phone up to his ear.

The angle he held it at blocked his profile, making it impossible for me to see his face. The casual conversation we’d been having was over. If he was running late, then there was nothing I could do. He should’ve prioritized her in the first place.

It seemed like it took a little while before Higashira-san answered.

“Hello?”

I was silent as I heard what Mizuto said to Higashira-san. The conversation lasted about ten seconds.

“Yeah, I’ll be right there,” he said before hanging up. He turned to me and said, “I’ll see you later. I need to stop somewhere before going home.”

“Oh...okay. Don’t come back too late. The days are getting shorter.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said shortly before quickly walking away.

He was most likely going to the library, which had nothing to do with the cultural festival, so Higashira-san was probably there. If I went home now, I’d see him again soon enough. If there was anything else I wanted to talk to him about, I’d be able to then, but still...

“Hey!” I called out to him, making him stop in his tracks.

“What?” he asked, turning his head.

“Um... Well...”

Why did I stop him? I didn’t even know, but I tried to find the words. “Th-The class T-shirts are supposed to arrive tomorrow!”

The rays from the sunset reddened half of his face. The other half was covered in shadow.

“Oh. I look forward to it.” Then he continued on his way, leaving me with just those few words.

I stood there for a little, watching him disappear down the stairs. He’d been like this forever. Our relationship had soured; it had

essentially been the Cold War, what with the nasty comments back and forth. That's just how we interacted with each other. I'd come to like this current state of ours.

This was how we usually were. This was how I liked it. But even so...why did I feel as if there was a wall between the two of us?

“Sorry.”

At the end of summer break, you were right there, waiting in the usual spot. Nothing had been fake. We’d become an item, our relationship was on the rocks from something really stupid, and the feelings that had once filled me a year earlier had grown faint.

“Good morning, Irido-kun.”

“Morning.”

I wished it had all been fake. That everything had happened in my head. That it had been a delusion. If none of our relationship had happened in the real world, then I might still have liked myself.

But there you were. You greeted me even though we hadn’t seen each other in over a month. Didn’t you get it? That there was no stronger sense of despair than this?

“Uh... Did you finish the summer homework?” you’d asked.

Even then, at our worst, we may have been able to fix things. We could’ve put our uneventful summer vacation behind us and gotten back together. There must’ve been something I could have said to make that happen. But still, I couldn’t forgive you or myself. So instead, I...

“Yeah. Not like I had any plans or anything.”

You froze up a little. And then, the very long process of self-hate began.

6:03 A.M.: Morning of the Cultural Festival

Yume Irido

I squinted as the morning sun shined through the curtains. I slowly got out of bed—but it wasn’t my bed at home. No, I was in a designated nap room at school. The clock showed that it was six in the morning. I hadn’t woken up this early in quite some time.

I looked around the room, where there were about eight other beds with other female committee members peacefully sleeping. Our upperclassmen had been worried about us after we’d ended up working late into the night, so they’d put us here. Though we’d gotten beds, the first-year boys weren’t as fortunate—they were packed into a room with sleeping bags.

We still had some time before we had to get up, but I couldn’t fall

back asleep. Today was the cultural festival—the busiest day for the committee members. I needed to be on my toes. With that in mind, I decided to wash my face, so I quietly left the room, wearing the tracksuit I'd been wearing in place of pajamas.

But first, I peeked into the meeting room next door. The committee members were packed next to each other like canned sardines. While the meeting room was more spacious than a normal classroom, there were enough people in there to make it feel cramped. As interested as I was in being in this environment where both boys and girls were sleeping—albeit separately—I'd probably have been too anxious to sleep.

“Huh?”

They'd been pretty hyper late into the night, so none of them had woken up yet, but one sleeping bag was empty. I was pretty sure the person who had been sleeping in that spot was...

With this weighing on my mind, I continued to the bathroom and washed my face. Thankfully, I didn't look sleep-deprived. I'd been worried about sleeping in an unfamiliar environment, but I looked perfectly fine.

I returned to the quiet hallway, but something felt weird. In about four hours, these halls would be filled with people and noise. But right now, my footsteps were the only sound. It was like the calm before the storm. Filled with a desire to explore, I began walking around.

As I wandered around the chilly halls, I peeked into the classrooms and looked out the windows. When I reached the stairs, I found myself climbing them for no particular reason. I usually never went outside, so I figured I might as well take the opportunity. I went up stair after stair until I reached the door to the roof. Though it was normally locked, an upperclassman told me that this door had been unlocked for the cultural festival so banners could be hung down the school walls.

Well, I'm not gonna get another chance like this, so I might as well. I gripped the cold doorknob and to my surprise, it opened easily. What caught my eye first wasn't the boundless, blue sky, but the familiar tracksuit-clad guy sitting against the tall fence.

“Mizuto?”

“Oh, it's you,” he mumbled, looking at me briefly before looking back at the ground.

I shut the door and approached him. “What are you doing out here? Aren't you cold?”

“Yeah... Probably should've brought a jacket.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Thirty minutes or so. I woke up early.”

That's rare for a night owl like him. I figured he must've been

uncomfortable sleeping around all those people.

“Are you okay? If you need to sleep more, you can use my bed.”

“*Your* bed?” He scoffed as if he were making fun of me. “You’ve really grown. Not embarrassed anymore?”

“Sh-Shut up! The beds in the nap room are for *anyone* who needs them! Also, it shouldn’t be a big deal for you... Not after everything.”

Truth be told, I *hadn’t* been thinking. How could I have asked him to sleep in my bed?!

“I’m good. I’d rather go back to my sleeping bag than be the only guy in a room of girls.”

“F-Fair point...”

I followed his gaze in an attempt to shift topics, but it didn’t seem like he was looking at anything in particular. All I could see was the line of empty stalls.

“I could’ve gone back, but I didn’t really want to, so I decided to rest up here. I’m more comfortable on my own,” he suddenly said in a low voice.

What are you doing here though? But the more I thought about it, the sooner it dawned on me that he was taking a break. While he preferred not to deal with others, he’d been thrown into the teenage milestone of pulling an almost all-nighter at school for the cultural festival. He must’ve needed some time to himself to recharge. If that was the case, it’d probably be best if I left him alone... *Wait, no! This is my chance! I can get him to promise to go around the festival with me.* I’d put it off, using the excuse that we’d already be together because of our job as committee members, but I wasn’t gonna get a better opportunity than now.

“S-So...” I nervously glanced at him. “Have you already...made plans with Higashira-san or anyone to see the festival together?”

“Nope. I *was* gonna hang out with her during my free time, though, because I doubt she’ll have a place in her class.”

O-Okay! So he doesn’t have a date for the festival just yet. “I-In that case, uh...after our shift at the café...would you be interested in, uh...” I hesitated. “Would you want to walk around with me? The cultural festival, that is! H-Higashira-san can come too!”

I chickened out! I’d already had an image of him turning me down because of Higashira-san, so I’d panicked and changed it from a date to a hang out with her! B-But this was okay! It was a lot better than not inviting him in the first place! I needed to think positively! I anxiously watched Mizuto for his reaction.

“Hm... Yeah. Isana might get weirdly depressed that she has nothing to do at the cultural festival while I’m helping to run it. It might be better if you’re there too. We might just end up in the library if it’s the two of us.”

“I can totally see that...” If anything, it was near impossible to imagine the two of them actually checking out the festival. “So it’s a promise then...okay?”

“Yeah.”

I did it! It went differently than I’d planned, but, still, I did it! Just as this huge burden was lifted off of my shoulders, I felt a chill run across my body. A literal one, that is.

“You wanna head back in soon?” I suggested. “You’re cold too, aren’t you?”

“You should go back inside. A strong breeze is enough to get you sick.”

“I-I’m a lot healthier than I was in middle school! Anyway, what about you?”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry—I’ll go back in before I catch a cold.”

“Okay...”

As hesitant as I was, I left him on the roof by himself. Before I shut the door behind me, the last thing I saw was him looking back down at the school grounds through the fence.

9:18 A.M.: You Look More Grown-Up than Usual

Akatsuki Minami

“Wow!” I clapped my hands together in front of an embarrassed Kawanami.

He was currently fully donning the Shosei-style look: the hakama, kimono, and everything else. His bright, gaudy hair was the same as always, but it honestly worked. He gave off a different vibe than Irido-kun had. He looked more like a high school dropout than anything, but I was confident that some people would be into it.

“Not too shabby! Aren’tcha happy I don’t have to shave your head?”

“You were going to make me bald if I couldn’t pull this off?!” Kawanami exclaimed.

“Well, you have to look the part. Shosei-style gives off intellectual vibes—y’know, the exact opposite of you?”

“And becoming bald helps me be smart, how?!”

“Oh, good point. If it did help, you’d shave your head before every test.”

“You’re not wrong...”

I cackled while pinching my sleeves, raising them to show off my outfit to Kawanami.

“Whatcha think?”

Of course, I was wearing the full outfit, boots included. I grinned

at him as I waited for his response, but he seemed disinterested.

“I mean... I already saw you in this before. What else can I say?”

“You’re supposed to *keep* complimenting me!”

“Why? You’re not my girlfriend.”

“Doesn’t matter. You should do it anyway! If you’re gonna look like a flirty guy, at least act the part!”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but I *only* look the part!” Kawanami frowned and tilted his head, his eyes flicking to my hair. I’d changed things up a bit with my ponytail today. “You wearing a different ribbon today?”

“Cute, isn’t it? I got a Japanese-style one to match this outfit!”

“You look like a tied-up bag of Japanese cand— Ow! Hey, don’t kick me with boots!”

“Don’t ever act like you’re good at handling girls ever again!”

“And you should never act like you’re a girl again!”

We exchanged low kick after low kick until my friend, Maki-chan, stuck her head through the curtains that divided the staff area from the customer area.

“Hey,” she said. “Married couple, it’s almost go time, so if you could stop your comedy routine, that’d be great.”

“Who’re you calling married?!” I cried.



“I’m so sad. Irido-san’s super popular, Akki is doing a married couple comedy routine, and now even Nasuka has a boyfriend. Why am I so forever alone?! Sob, sob. Weep, weep.”

“It’s okay, Maki-chan, you’re tall and cool!”

“That only makes me popular with the girls!”

Maki-chan was captain of the basketball team, tall, and slender, so she looked great in hakama. As a result, she was a hit among the girls. It was a shame that she was only interested in the opposite sex.

“I want a boyfriend too! Do you think someone’ll hit on me today?” she asked.

“Flirting is banned—don’t you remember?” Kawanami snarked. “Anyway, the only guys who flirt like that are deadbeats. You deserve better than that, so chill.”

“Huh?” Maki-chan’s eyes widened as she looked at Kawanami and she pressed her hand against her chest. *Uh...* “Crap, my heart just skipped a beat. What the hell, Kawanami?! You really are just as much of a lady-killer as you look! You’re gonna get in trouble with your wife.”

“My what, now? Do I look like the kinda guy that can commit?”

“And there we have it! The line of a playboy!”

I silently glared at Maki-chan as she laughed with the idiot. *What the hell? You can’t even be bothered to compliment my cosplay, but you’re being nice to her? Really? I see. Okay...*

“You can just barf your brains out when a girl hits on you, for all I care,” I muttered.

I’m done. It’s about time for the legend of “The Amazing Barf Man” to begin and be passed down for generations. Just as I turned around to leave the staff area, he called out to me.

“You should be careful not to get hit on too,” Kawanami suddenly said, strangely gentle. “You have a nice face, if nothing else. Plus, that cosplay makes you look more grown-up.”

“Huh? Me? It does?”

“Yeah, the boots give you a few centimeters.”

“...”

“Ow! Don’t step on me with your boots! You’re gonna crush me! Ow!”

Get crushed, you bastard!

9:45 A.M.: Savior from the Taisho Era

Isana Higashira

The cultural festival had, regrettably, begun. However, my fellow

classmates here in 1-3 were strangely unmotivated. Our class had ended up deciding on a low-effort photo gallery with the full intention of leaving to go visit other classes and enjoy everything the festival had to offer.

Thanks to their lack of motivation, I was able to get away without contributing. However, I had nowhere to go today, so I was doomed to laze around in our classroom. The only problem was that the girls who had been tasked with watching the classroom also had nothing to do, and were looking for some kind of amusement. *Oh, would you look at that? It seems they have found a fun toy to play with.*

“Hey, Higashira-san, you’re just staying here?”

“W-Well...” I stammered.

“You have a boyfriend, right?” one of them asked. “Oh, but he’s a committee member, huh? I guess he doesn’t have too much free time.”

“Oof, yeah,” another added. “But hey, what’s he like? I’ve never seen him.”

“Hm, he’s a little wimpy-looking. Some people might think he’s handsome, I guess, but I’m more into muscular guys.”

“Nobody asked about *your* type! Sorry, Higashira-san. She just has a muscle fetish.”

“Hey! Takes one to know one!”

All I could do was nervously laugh. *Somebody, please! I need to be rescued! My vitality is being sapped by conversing with these girls, whose names I am not even cognizant of!* They were the only ones enjoying themselves. The best I could do was force a smile.

However, it seemed as if my wish had been granted. A certain visitor arrived at our class, which had become a glorified rest area, devoid of the energetic atmosphere outside. It was Mizuto-kun, who was wearing Japanese-styled clothes, including hakama, a cape, and a school cap.

The two girls who’d been excitedly chatting with me abruptly fell silent as soon as Mizuto-kun entered, his black cape fluttering. I froze. I...I had been informed of this. I’d even seen pictures. But even so...how was it so *perfect*!?

He’s like the eldest son of a noble family! Like my parents picked out an arranged marriage partner for me, but I refused to meet him, because I wanted to let my heart choose who I marry, but then I have a meet-cute with him without actually knowing it’s him, and I think, “Goodness, I wouldn’t mind being in an arranged marriage with this beautiful boy,” and then he IS the beautiful boy! It was just! Like! That! I was so caught off guard, so shaken, that I got lost in my fantasies. Mizuto scanned the classroom, found me, and walked over. *Huh? Am I not dreaming? Is he really here? Oh, right! I know him! We’re friends!*

“Isana.” *And he calls me by my first name!* “I came to check on you.

Sorry, were you in the middle of something?” he asked the two girls next to me.

The girls, who had been so fluid in their communication mere moments ago, could now only produce sounds of bewilderment.

Mizuto, seemingly confused, tilted his head before returning his gaze to me. “I have to do my rounds, but I’ll be back around noon. I’m stuck wearing this for promotion reasons... Can’t wait to get out of it as soon as possible.”

“Don’t!” a unified protest came from the three of us.

Even though I couldn’t utter a word mere moments ago, I couldn’t help but scream too.

Mizuto-kun looked confused at how in sync we’d suddenly become. “Okay, well, like I said, I just wanted to check on you, but you look like you’re doing fine. I’ll see you later.” With that, he left the classroom.

I watched him leave with the two classmates whose names I didn’t know.

“Intellectual types might be good too...”

“Yeah...”

A simple glimpse of him had been enough to turn their fetishes on their heads. Mizuto-kun was fearsome.

10:05 A.M.: The Heart Says More than the Lips

Yume Irido

“Look, she’s so cute!”

“Wow, you’re right!”

I could feel my face get warm after hearing these comments from yet another group of people. I’d been naive in thinking that since the halls would be filled with people cosplaying, my outfit with its hakama and boots wouldn’t draw any attention. How could I have thought that when we’d specifically picked these outfits to stand out?

“Working the café might have been better...”

“Like hell you could do that.”

“O-Of course I could! I can totally serve customers!”

Mizuto and I bickered as we walked through the halls. How could he look so calm after being so mean?! There was a placard on the back of Mizuto’s cape that said, “Taisho Roman café in class 1-7!” Akatsuki-san had put it on him before we went on our rounds. It was honestly more embarrassing than our costumes, so the two of us switched wearing it periodically.

“Just wait until my shift! I can do anything when I put my mind to it!”

“I know. I heard you practicing night after night through the wall.”

“Urgh. D-Don’t listen!”

“It’s not my fault that you’re so loud.”

This was why living together wasn’t as glamorous as some might have made it out to be. What about Valentine’s Day? Where was I supposed to make chocolates?

The most time-consuming job for committee members during the festival was making our rounds. We needed to resolve any trouble we saw and help any kids who were lost too. There was no time to be shy.

Part of the reason I’d invited Higashira-san to go around the festival with us later was also because I’d already be alone with Mizuto while we made our rounds. It was practically a date, wasn’t it? According to an upperclassman, there was a precedent for couples getting together after this activity.

I checked my watch. “Hey, we should get going.”

“Hm? Oh, right. We need to do our inspection of the haunted house.”

“Yeah! We’ll be inconveniencing them if we’re late.”

Checking to see if the class stalls were safe or not was also one of our duties as committee members. Haunted houses were dark and hard to see in, making it easy for problems to occur. That’s why committee members like us needed to go through them first to make sure they were safe. Yes, this was our job. It had absolutely nothing to do with my own selfish desires. This was for work! I had absolutely no choice but to go through a haunted house with Mizuto!

“Oh, there they are.”

“Are you the committee members?”

“Wow, your costumes are cute!”

When we arrived, we were met by the students working reception. Their classroom had a very “gloom and doom” vibe to it, appropriate for a haunted house. They’d just barely finished their preparations in time, so we couldn’t come until right before the start of the festival. We were really cutting it close, but as far as I could see, it looked well put together.

Just as I started to feel nervous, Mizuto switched to work mode.

“Would it be okay if we began our inspection?”

“Go ahead!”

“You two can just go right on in.”

“Watch your step and follow the path, okay?”

“By the way, it’s really dark inside, so if you hold on to each other a little, nobody’ll know.”

Oh my god, they’re encouraging us. This is a haunted house for couples!

“Come on,” Mizuto said, pulling back the black curtain over the entrance as I stood there, trying to figure out what to do.

“H-Hey, wait!” I frantically chased after him and passed through the curtain.

It was so dark inside, almost cave-like, that I could barely believe it was still daytime. They’d placed guiding lights in the back that mimicked the glow of human souls. *What kind of lights are those? How did they make them?*

“They made a way to ensure people know where they’re going,” Mizuto calmly observed, still clearly in work mode.

Can he handle horror? Ugh, I should’ve taken him to a haunted house when we were dating!

I took a deep breath and prepared myself for what I was about to ask. “Hey...could we...hold hands?”

“Huh? Why?”

What do you mean, “Why?”! When someone cute asks you to hold their hand, you don’t question them—you just agree! But still, I didn’t back down.

“Well, it’s dark, we’re wearing hakama, and we’ll cause them a lot of problems if we trip and break something. So, holding hands is just a measure of precaution...okay?”

“Fine, whatever.”

Just as he agreed, I gently gripped his slender hand. Despite how delicate it felt, it also had a toughness to it, which reminded me that he was a guy. *Have his hands gotten bigger since middle school?* I interlocked my fingers with his, as though we were a couple. Mizuto shot me a look, but I pretended not to notice. *I’m not bothered by anything at all. Honestly, you’re being a bit too self-conscious.* I met his gaze, and he turned away. I couldn’t help but giggle.



Just like that, our haunted house date began. I could hear the sound of dripping water echoing as we walked the narrow path through the dark. As we did, the first ghost appeared in the midst of dim lights that served as our guide.

I screamed—but I hadn't planned to. I was genuinely frightened as I clung to Mizuto's arm. Whatever it was that had popped out... Well, it certainly wasn't human. I'd assumed that the bread and butter of haunted houses would be something like pale hands bursting through sliding doors, but I hadn't seen anything like that on the path, so I'd thought I was safe. My wrong assumptions had made me let my guard down.

"Hey..." As I froze up from both surprise and bitterness of my expectations being betrayed, a trembling voice whispered in my ear. "How long are you gonna hold on to me?"

"A-Ah, sor—" I began to say before realizing that I couldn't back down. I couldn't be the same wimp as I'd always been. This was my chance. I had to press harder. "A-Actually, could I stay like this a little longer? I'm...scared."

"You are? The person who reads books with dismembered bodies is scared?"

"M-Mystery and horror are completely different genres!" I said stubbornly, gripping his arm harder.

It took me three seconds to realize that I'd firmly squished his arm against my chest. I'd lost my path of retreat. *I'm so embarrassed! But if I run away now, he'll know I'm pushing myself.* I could feel my heart beating faster. Could he tell? *Do you know that it's because I'm holding onto your arm? Or do you think it's because I'm scared?*

"Let's get going. We can't stay here forever," he muttered, walking forward and pulling me with him.

There were more elaborate jump scares as we continued. Ghosts popped out of nowhere. We were being followed. Quickened footsteps. It was all so scary that I didn't have a chance to seduce him.

Just as I figured that we were nearing the end, we came to the classroom door. All we had to do was open it, and we'd be free. But as we got closer, I noticed a poster over the door's window, blocking it.

Demonstrate pure love to defeat the monsters and lift the curse placed on the door. A hug, perhaps? Maybe even...a kiss?

Mizuto and I stared at it in silence. *What the hell?! What kind of haunted house doesn't let you leave unless you kiss?!* I got a very bad feeling about this. The more I thought about it, the more I felt their

smiles *had* been suspicious.

“Wh-What do we do?” I whispered.

“Well, we’re not kissing. They must be watching from somewhere, though, if that’s the condition for leaving.”

O-Oh. Right. Yeah. That was when I remembered that everyone thought he was dating Higashira-san. Mizuto would be labeled a cheater if the information that we kissed got out somehow, even if we only pretended.

“Oh well. I guess that’s it, then. If we can’t get out unless we follow the rules, then I guess that’s that,” I said, in a loud voice, standing in a way that made it seem as if I really didn’t want to.

Then, I hugged him. The poster *did* mention hugging, after all. There was no other choice. Right?

“H-Hey!”

“Come on, hurry up and hug me back, or else we can’t get out.”

“Curse it all...”

I laughed a little. I’d never met a person who would actually say something like that. I felt his arms wrap around my back. Bliss filled my heart as I felt his warmth against me. I felt simultaneously excited and at peace. This might’ve been the first time he’d hugged me since we broke up.

I felt his heart beating. It was a different rhythm from mine, and I was sure that it was getting faster and faster with each passing second. I reflexively smiled. I couldn’t stop myself from teasing him. I brought my lips up close to his ears.

“It’s been a while. Feel good?”

His heart skipped a beat. No matter how cool he played it, his heart didn’t lie. I’d only really seen him calmly working as a committee member, so the feeling of his heart beating like crazy just made him all the more adorable to me. But these heavenly seconds couldn’t last forever, of course. I heard the click of a lock opening.

We immediately let go of each other. I looked up at him, but it was dark, and he immediately looked away, so I couldn’t really tell what kind of face he was making. Then again, I was pretty relieved that he couldn’t see my face. *Wait. What did I say to him? It was kinda dirty, wasn’t it?!*

The door opened to the bright hallway. We’d ended up looking in opposite directions as an awkward air hung around us.

“Thanks for going through!”

“How was it?!”

“It’s really good, isn’t it?! It’s gonna be a must for all couples!”

The girls were very excited about what their class had come up with, but we, as committee members, had to give them the final judgment.

“It was fundamentally fine, but we must request that you remove the poster at the end. It goes against public morals,” I said.

“What?!” the girls cried out in dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, the guys didn’t look all too surprised. They almost looked like they wanted to say, “Told you so.” I couldn’t blame them.

We left their class and resumed our rounds. After several moments of silence, Mizuto began to speak softly.

“Back there...”

“Huh?”

“Back there in the haunted house, I was just surprised by how well done it was.”

But your heart actually beat faster because you embraced me, right? Why are you trying to force such a clumsy lie?

“Were you pretending not to be scared for me?”

“No! I was just *surprised*. That’s i—”

“But actually, you held in your fear. Aw, so cute!”

“No! Argh!”

I guess the only part of you that can be honest is your heart, huh?

10:56 A.M.: Why Not Just You?

Mizuto Irido

After my teeny tiny slipup in the haunted house, Yume and I continued our rounds of the festival. The only problem was that Yume had gotten a big head from what’d happened.

If I could cut one of the three main human desires, normally I’d pick sleep because I’d rather spend that time reading. But right now, I’d choose lust. I mean, how was I *supposed* to have reacted? It hadn’t been the first time we’d hugged or anything. *Ugh, this is the biggest humiliation of my life.*

I continued walking through the bustling halls of the festival, but my mind was focused on something else entirely. *Is Isana okay?* When I’d checked on her earlier, she’d seemed uncomfortable due to her classmates talking to her. Hopefully she wasn’t too bored. Then again, she *was* gifted at killing time, so maybe I had nothing to worry about. Either way, I wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible so I could go hang out with her.

As I pulled out my phone to check the time, I noticed that Yume had stopped walking for a split second, wincing.

“You okay?”

“Y-Yeah. I’m fine. I just tripped a little,” she said as she flashed me an empty smile.

I knew her better than to take her at her word. I looked down at her boots and thought for a little. "Shoe bite?"

"Huh? H-How did you—"

"You've been walking around in shoes you're not used to for an hour. Shouldn't surprise you that I'd figure it out." *Honestly, if I were quicker on the uptake, I'd have guessed sooner.*

"The nurse's office is a little far, so..."

"I-I'm seriously okay!"

"Sheesh, give it a rest already. I'm gonna take a look at your foot. There should be an empty classroom nearby. Come on."

I grabbed Yume by the wrist and pulled her forward, without much resistance. The hallway outside the classroom was empty, almost as if we'd been transported to another world. Strangely enough, we could hear our footsteps echoing, despite how noisy the school had become.

I opened the door and peeked inside. I'd heard that there were always students who slacked off in these classrooms, but no one was currently in this one.

"Perfect, it's empty. Sit in that chair."

"I'm telling you, it's not a big deal. It just hurts a little now and then."

"It shouldn't hurt in the first place. Think about how much more work I'll have to do if you can't move."

"You're worried about yourself?"

"So what?"

"Never mind..."

I crouched in front of Yume. "Which foot?"

"The right one..."

I undid the shoelaces and took off the boot. She started to panic when I reached for her sock, but thanks to Isana, I'd gotten used to this sort of thing. But, like, what was there to freak out about? She'd made me put knee-highs on her before, so why was she acting all innocent now?

Bit by bit, I removed her sock, revealing the pale skin underneath. Yume stifled laughter from her ticklish feet as I held her foot in my hand.

"Your ankle and your big toe have gotten red. It doesn't look too bad right now, though."

"S-See? I'm fine."

"I said, it doesn't look bad right *now*. You still have a shift at our class's café, remember? Knowing you, you'd pretend like everything's fine and continue working no matter how bad things got."

Yume fell silent, slightly embarrassed.

I decided to treat it right then and there so things wouldn't get out

of hand. The fastest solution would be to have her walk in shoes she was actually used to, but we didn't have any with us.

"Oh, I know." I reached into my pocket.

Yume raised her eyebrows at what I'd pulled out. "Why do you have bandages?"

"Just in case the kids who visit hurt themselves. Better than nothing, right?" I put the bandages over the red areas.

"You're more caring than I thought..." Yume mumbled as she watched me work.

"Not really. I just hate crying kids, so I thought of a countermeasure."

"I guess only Higashira-san and I know that you're actually nice."

After finishing up her first aid, I kept my eyes on her feet while grabbing her socks.

"Even if that were true...so what?"

"You could have so many friends, but people think that you're hard to approach—especially the other committee members."

"Well, they're not wrong." I continued focusing on her foot, not looking up as I put the boot back on. "I don't want them thinking I'm approachable. Chatting tires me out."

"Even with me?"

"*Especially with you.*"

"Aw, don't be like that. We're family, so you could stand to be a little nicer to me." Yume giggled.

I don't need something as useless as "other people." I'm not like you. I'm hopelessly different from you.

I stood up after tying her shoelace. "How's it feel?"

Yume stood up as well and looked at her right foot while walking between the desks in the room. "Mm... I think I should be okay. It doesn't hurt anymore."

"Don't push yourself. I don't wanna have to take a look at it again."

"Aw, be nice. I know you're a good boy," she said, giggling again. "Thanks."

Deep down, I remembered how she took care of me when I was sick. Yuni-san had told me to thank Yume in person, but I still hadn't. *And yet you did it so effortlessly.*

"Sure," I said shortly before turning towards the door.

All that ever came out of my mouth were empty words.

11:06 A.M.: The Extreme Genius Is Targeting My Chastity for Some Reason

Yume Irido

Just as Mizuto and I left the classroom, we heard a creaking sound from behind us.

“W-Wait!” I sharply whispered, slowly turning back towards the room. “Is...someone there?”

“Huh?”

Just as soon as Mizuto knit his eyebrows, we heard the creaking sound again. We looked at each other and tiptoed back to peek through the classroom door’s window.

A guy and a girl crawled out from behind the podium.

“Phew, that was close. Ha ha ha.”

“Give me a break, Kurenai-san...”

There were people there the entire time?! They saw me let Mizuto touch all over my foot?! The bigger surprise, though, was that we knew both of them. The girl was the vice president, Suzuri Kurenai, which was obvious from her asymmetric hairstyle. Judging from his naturally curly hair and glasses, the guy was the treasurer, Joji Haba, who was always not too far behind her. Were those two hiding in that small space under the podium together?

“Wh-What’s going on? Why were they hiding there?”

“Obviously it’s because they were in a compromising situation.”

Huh? What kind of situation would that be? A compromising situation between a guy and girl alone in an empty classroom? Kurenai-senpai patted down the back of her skirt and sat at a desk by the window, crossing her legs.

She was a small-framed girl, but her figure was very distinct and feminine. In short, she had—and I’m sure there are better words to describe this, but—the perfect body for childbirth.

Her thighs were thicker than I had expected—her short skirt and crossed legs made it hard not to ogle them. Well, Haba-senpai was avoiding looking at them, so I made Mizuto do the same.

Kurenai-senpai put her hands behind her, making her look defenseless, as if to spur on Haba-senpai. “Well then, Joe, now that you’ve thoroughly absorbed my scent, would you like to continue?”

“I have not, and I would not,” Haba-senpai clearly stated.

This was the first time I’d heard him speak so much. But more importantly...continue what?

Kurenai-senpai chuckled. “Truth is a virtue. When you lost your balance and fell face-first into my chest, your nostrils widened by two millimeters. I apologize. If I’d known that was going to happen, I wouldn’t have worn a bra.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I don’t get why you’d wanna seduce a guy like me.”

“Is it so hard to understand? There is no greater enjoyment than

seducing the guy I'm infatuated with."

I-Infatuated?! My ears aren't deceiving me, right?!

Kurenai-senpai loosened the ribbon on her uniform. "Or perhaps my virginity isn't worth exchanging yours for?"

V-Virginity?!

"Should we really be watching this?" Mizuto whispered.

"J-Just a little more! Just a little more, okay?!"

Haba-senpai had his back to us, so I couldn't see his face, but I could tell that his ears had turned red.

"I'll say this as many times as I need to—I'm the unworthy one in this exchange. I don't know what kind of flight of fancy this is for you, but you can do so much better, Kurenai-san."

"You'd really call someone's first love a 'flight of fancy'? I'll say *this* as many times as I need to—you're not as small a person as you seem to believe. After all, I *have* approved of you."

"I'm just a little good with technology. I've got no other redeeming—"

"Everyone—and I mean *everyone*—has an ideal version of themselves, whether they're aware of it or not," Kurenai-senpai suddenly declared. Even though we weren't in the room, her voice strangely reverberated within me. "I believe that one's beauty lies with how deeply they treasure that version of themselves. Joe, your ideal self is beautiful, and that's precisely why you look down on who you are right now. It's because you treasure who you *could* be that you minimize who you are. That attitude of yours is beautiful to me."

Haba-senpai fell silent. Even Mizuto held his breath. *Our ideal selves...* I had an ideal self. That's why I'd grown out my hair, overcome my shyness, made friends, and...why I'd confessed. Did Mizuto have an ideal self? In middle school, I'd always thought that he was some kind of omnipotent hero. Even now, I found him strangely incredible; he rarely seemed to need help. Could someone like him have a goal he felt he couldn't achieve?

"Even so..." Haba-senpai was quiet most of the time, but now he spoke firmly. "My ideal self is not the kind to lose control to poorly executed seduction by his intelligent but vulgar classmate while the rest of the school is working their asses off."

"I see..." Kurenai-senpai fixed her ribbon and lightly hopped off the desk. "I'd read in reference materials that taking advantage of the commotion would conversely serve to heighten the pleasure, but it seems that it was my misunderstanding."

"I don't know what you've been reading, but you should toss them immediately."

"Oh well. Looks like I need a new idea. It's tough falling for a guy with such high ideals."

“Could you maybe come to the realization that it’s a lot tougher dealing with a weird girl who’s got a thing for you?”

Oh no. They’re coming this way! We quickly and stealthily moved away and mixed into the noisy halls of the festival. Only then did we finally exhale.

“Phew... I always thought there was something between them, since they’re always together, but I guess they really are close like that.”

“‘Close’ doesn’t even begin to cover their relationship,” Mizuto countered.

He had a point. It was kind of on-brand for Kurenai-senpai to have a different approach to romance, but I also got the feeling that she wasn’t very good at it.

“I feel for Haba-senpai,” Mizuto mumbled.

“Huh? Why? Kurenai-senpai’s kinda out there, but she’s cute and overall an amazing person.”

“Being with someone *too* amazing comes with its own set of problems,” Mizuto said before walking off.

I tried to decipher what he’d said. Did he mean that she was out of Haba-senpai’s league? True, that might be hard to deal with—Haba-senpai had pretty much said the same thing too—but it shouldn’t matter. After all, hadn’t *we* dated, despite not matching each other at all?

11:34 A.M.: I’m Glad He’s Popular, but I’m Jealous

Akatsuki Minami

“Oh, there they are!”

I saw Yume-chan and Irido-kun emerge from the crowd as I waited outside the classroom. I beckoned to them, and they ran to the back door while glancing at the entrance where the customers were lining up.

“Sorry, we ran a little behind schedule. Why are there so many people lined up?” Yume-chan asked.

“Is it just me, or is the line actually going past the classroom next to ours?” Irido-kun asked.

“You’re right! There’re a lot more people than we anticipated. Even with a time limit to rush people in and out and adding extra seating, we’re *still* having trouble keeping up!”

Good thing the class next to ours wasn’t using their classroom for their cultural festival activity. If they had, it would’ve been a mess distinguishing our customers from theirs.

“Why is our class’s café so popular?”

“Apparently word *really* got around. People are talking about how the coffee Kine-chan made is a lot better than you’d expect, and... Oh, also, people really liked our walking advertisements—you two!” I showed Yume-chan my phone. She looked confused, but a little happy, when she saw all the positive feedback. Irido-kun, meanwhile, just frowned. “Anyway, come in and help. We really need it!”

“O-Okay!”

I pulled the two of them by their hands into the classroom.

“Oh, that’s her!”

“God the costume looks *too* good on her.”

Yume-chan’s eyes nervously darted around as the customers buzzed about. I giggled. *You have such a low opinion of yourself, Yume-chan. Can’t you see just how cute you are?* But, of course, Yume-chan wasn’t the only one making a splash. Irido-kun in his Shosei-style clothes was making the girls—who were about seventy percent of our customer base, by the way—begin excitedly whispering, squealing, or shivering and gawking at him.

In contrast, Irido-kun looked completely unfazed by their reactions and had his usual calm expression on. I hated the idea of him realizing his effect on women, but it pissed me off even more when he pretended not to notice.

I looked over at Yume-chan, who had entered the staff area through the curtain that was acting as a partition. She still didn’t seem to have accepted the current situation.

“Uh... Is it just me, or are there a lot of girls?” she asked.

“It’s not just you. The girls were mainly the ones who were spreading the word among themselves. Thanks to that, the café’s guests are mainly girls and we don’t have to worry about getting hit on at all!”

People could only get in by invitation, and there didn’t seem to be many people needing to be entered into the system that Irido-kun had come up with. It was starting to look like all his hard work had been for nothing.

“There you are, Irido. Where were you?!” A voice with deep resentment called out as a male staff member, dressed in the same style of clothes as Irido-kun, came in.

“All the girls came here after seeing you and they’ve been dissin’ us under their breath nonstop, saying that we look weird in our costumes or that we don’t look nearly as good as that *one* guy they saw!”

“Of course we don’t! How are normal, modern high school students like us supposed to pull that off?!”

“This is your fault! Your presence makes us look insignificant! Get out there before our hearts take any more damage!”

Yikes... It looked like the guys were having trouble since they didn't have as much flexibility with their costumes as we did. We'd only really planned for family members and acquaintances to stop by, but the power of our walking advertisements had been too much. Now we were serving people we'd never even met before. Advertising had its downsides after all.

Kawanami, who'd been the most popular due to his perfect flirtatiousness, appeared behind the guys cornering Irido-kun and grinned. "They're waitin' for ya. Get out there and give 'em what they want, Irido!"

"Fine..." Irido-kun deeply exhaled. Looking at him, I understood how unfair it was that he looked so naturally good in that outfit, despite his typical sulkiness. "But I can't do anything extra. Just whatever's in the script."

"That's perfect! I'm sure that's exactly what they want."

Kawanami cleared the path for Irido, and I gave Yume a little push.

"You should help too, Yume-chan. I'll be right there with you, so don't worry about messing up, okay?"

"O-Okay."

Yume-chan looked visibly nervous, and Irido-kun's eyes were hidden by his hat, but as soon as they entered the café, the customers all began raising their hands in unison.

"Oh, over here!"

"Can I place an order?"

"Refill, please!"

Oh god, they are definitely overdoing it. Yume-chan started panicking at the flood of orders.

"Wh-What should I do?!"

"Start from the closest table and I'll do the rest. Here's a notepad for orders!" I said as I pushed her towards a nearby table of three girls. *This'll probably be easier for her than interacting with guys or adults.*

"You're really pretty close up too!"

"Wow, how is your hair so nice?!"

"Can I take a picture? I wanna post it on my feed."

"Uh. Ah. Well—"

"All right, dear customers, please place an order. A photo'll be a hundred thousand yen!" I jumped in to save Yume as she was overwhelmed by the flood of questions unique to girls.

"That's too expensive!"

"Scam!"

"Give us a discount!" The girls laughed.

This wasn't a real café, so playing along with them like this wasn't a problem.

“Th-Thanks, Akatsuki-san.”

“No problem! It’s not like this is a real café or anything. Take it easy and have fun! I’ll be right behind you, ’kay?”

“I feel so worthless...”

She’s so serious, but that’s also what makes her cute!

On the other hand, Irido-kun seemed to be doing fine.

“So, one café au lait and an unsweetened iced tea. Is that right?”

“Y-Yes.”

“C-Could we take a picture?”

“My apologies, but pictures are prohibited,” he said with a slightly troubled look on his face.

“Hnngh!”

“I-It’s okay!”

Surprisingly, he was pushing the girls to their emotional wits’ ends. I’d imagined him serving customers in his usual expressionless, robotic manner, but he was even *smiling* at them.

“Not bad, Irido-kun! Why doesn’t he act like this more often?” I asked Yume-chan.

“He apparently gets like this when he works. He even acts like this around the other committee members.”

“Something wrong?” I asked, seeing a mix of emotions revealing themselves on her face as she fought between a smile and a frown.

She hid her mouth behind the notepad out of embarrassment. “I’m happy that other people notice how great he is, but...I don’t really like when he smiles at other girls.”

Who is this girl, and why is she so damn cute?!



“Hey, Irido! Come here real quick,” Kawanami said, suddenly calling Irido-kun over. He looked suspiciously at Kawanami before walking over to him. “Why are you acting so nice to the customers? Be cold and aloof!”

“What the hell kind of instructions are those?”

“Shaddup! Don’t you know the slogan, ‘We hate to see you smile’?!”

“What kind of shadow McDonalds is this?” Irido-kun quipped calmly, making Yume-chan almost do a spit take.

11:55 A.M.: My Friends Are Different When They Work

Isana Higashira

Though I hadn’t planned on doing so, I went to visit Yume-san and Mizuto-kun’s class during their shift. Their class, 1-7, was the talk of the school with their Taisho Roman café, but still...

“It is...quite popular.”

It was almost like a line to Mister Donuts during a special promotion. Then again, this didn’t affect me, since I lacked the courage to enter any establishment—much less a café—by myself. Still, I was very taken aback by their class’s popularity. I pushed my way towards one of the large classroom windows to join others who were curious about what everyone was waiting for and peeked into their class.

“Oh...” I immediately discovered Mizuto-kun and Yume-san.

Though I’d seen Mizuto-kun in his costume prior to arriving, I hadn’t seen Yume-san. She was a perfect match for her outfit. I couldn’t help but sigh. *Those two truly dated in middle school, huh? Oh no, my heart is racing.*

They seemed different as they served the customers. When he’d come to my classroom, it was like seeing him in a costume, but at work, he looked like the real deal. It was as if a real-life student from the Taisho era was working in the café...not that a real student would have worked in a café.

“Will that complete your order?” Mizuto-kun asked a table.

“Y-Yes!”

“Yep! Yes! Thank you!”

“Enjoy.”

But also...he seems much softer than usual, or perhaps kinder? What is going on? Why is he smiling so much?! What happened to the Mizuto-kun who wouldn’t react even a little bit no matter how much I clung to him, and continued to treat me coldly?! Why was that face of

kindness something only his customers were allowed to see? *This isn't fair!*

Perhaps I could have simply requested that he perform such niceties to me as well, but I sincerely doubted he'd agree. I lacked both the courage to enter their café and the money to pay for anything. My only recourse was to bitterly stare through this window. *Look at me. Look at how Mizuto-kun's alleged girlfriend is behaving.*

"Hm? Higashira-san?"

"Gah!"

Minami-san appeared out of nowhere, startling me. She was wearing hakama just like Yume-san, and her hair was tied into a ponytail with a large Japanese-styled ribbon. *Wow, just a change in ribbon gives her a completely different aura.*

"Whatcha doin' out here? Not comin' inside?"

"O-Oh, I do not possess the courage to do so. The line is extraordinarily long too..."

"I get it. It's hard for you to come in, so you're just stealing looks at Irido-kun from the window, huh? Well, what do ya think?"

"It's almost as if he's become a different person. Watching him makes my heart pound."

"Very good! There's still a bit of girl in you yet, Higashira-san!"

"Of course there is! Every day, my emotional levels are at the max while trying to remain his friend!"

"How is that different from being his girlfriend?" Minami-san asked with wary eyes. *Mizuto-kun will never feel the same way about me. That's how.* "Anyway, wanna come in? I'll let you right in, since we're friends."

"O-Oh no, it's quite okay! I'd feel bad for the people waiting!"

"Okay. Hm... Oh, I know. Are you busy?"

"Huh? Oh, no. I'm waiting for Mizuto-kun to complete his shift."

"Perfect! My shift's just about over, so I'm gonna take a break, so come with me! There's somethin' I want your help with."

"Okay, I suppose..."

What help could she possibly need from someone who didn't even contribute to their own class's exhibition?

"Kay, I'm gonna change and be right back. Don't go anywhere!" Minami-san let out a suspicious laugh as she departed.

I saw her walk up to Yume-san and say that she was borrowing something.

"Huh? O-Oh, *that*. Okay, thanks." Yume-san looked at me with a similarly suspicious smile on her face.

Uh... What is going on? What are they planning? As I attempted to figure out what they were doing, I heard whispers from around me.

"Did she say Higashira?"

“Isn’t that Irido-kun’s...”

“Oh, it’s that girl!”

Though I’d decided to not let others bother me, their comments left me feeling strange. I didn’t want to stand out any further, or else I risked death. I moved a little distance from their classroom while going back to my original thoughts regarding Minami-san’s plan. *I am genuinely beginning to grow worried!*

12:46 P.M.: Even if You Forget, Fate Finds a Way

Mizuto Irido

We stopped people from lining up as lunchtime neared. After taking care of the rest of the customers in line, I could finally take a break and be free of the stupid customer service smile that I wasn’t used to wearing. Then, I’d spend the afternoon with Isana and Yume, going around the festival as I’d promised. But I wasn’t in the clear just yet.

“Hey, Irido, someone’s asking for you,” Kawanami said, calling me from the staff area.

“Me? Who?”

“Dunno, but it’s some gorgeous lady with an elementary schooler. You know them?”

A lady with an elementary schooler? There was only one person I could think of this being.

“Fine. I’ll go.”

“You look really annoyed.”

“Of course I am. Wouldn’t you be annoyed if your family came to where you worked?”

“Yeah...” He looked kind of unsatisfied but also understanding.

“Good luck,” he said, lightly tapping me on the shoulder.

As I made my way through the classroom that had now calmed down quite a bit, I saw that Yume had already been called over by the same person.

“C’mon, Chikuma, say something to your big cousin Yume!”

“H-Huh? U-Uh...”

“Madoka-san, you don’t have to force him. Sorry, Chikuma-kun, you can just act normally, okay?”

As expected, it was Madoka-san. Yume had invited her, and she had said she was coming, but I had really hoped she wouldn’t. *What a pain.* Also, why did she bring her little brother? I felt bad for him. He was already really shy, but now he was in the midst of a high school cultural festival? *Poor kid.*

I moved closer to the high schooler and college student who’d

made an elementary schooler red in the face.

“Oh,” Madoka-san reacted. “Mizuto-kun! I’ve heard all about how popular you are! Apparently you’re number one in your class?”

“I don’t remember there being any kind of ranking. Also, this is my only shift. I have other work as a cultural festival committee member.”

“Aw, you. Don’t be so shy. I saw the girls fawning over you!” she snickered. “I’m so proud!”

I didn’t want to deal with her, so I turned towards Yume. “Don’t slack off for too long. They’re not the only customers.”

“What’s your problem? You should treat her as nicely as you do the other customers. Sorry, Madoka-san, there are more customers than I thought, so...”

“No problem! We’ll just chill here. Go on!”

Yume bowed her head and left their table. Chikuma-kun followed her with his eyes. *Well, generally speaking, anyone would start looking up to a new family member like her. Just generally speaking.* I got up and left to seat new customers. Fortunately, a table had just opened up.

“How many in your party?” I asked.

“Two!”

There were two middle school girls. Judging by their small stature, they were probably first-years. One of them looked very outgoing, while the other had her eyes fixed on the ground. *Are these the last customers?*

We’d posted newspapers from the Taisho era on the walls and put some of the popular books from back then on the bookshelves. The girls stared at them in wonder as I guided them to their table.

Overall, we’d had a lot of middle school customers. They’d probably been invited by their older siblings as a way for them to check out their high school so they could decide whether or not they wanted to apply. Most likely I’d have already graduated by the time these girls would start high school.

When we arrived at the table, the more social-looking one began happily talking. “You look really good in that! You think so too, right?” she asked, turning to the other girl who was strangely staring at me for some reason.

I’d gotten used to the stares while wearing this outfit, but this girl was looking at me like I had something on my face. *What’s her deal?*

“Um...” she said slowly, furrowing her brow at me. “Have we...met before?”

“Huh?”

It was so sudden that I accidentally slipped out of work mode. Did she really ask me if we’d met before? I looked at her well-formed, languid face closely. Her hairstyle was difficult for me to describe—

she wore it half down and half in pigtails. She had sharp, almond-shaped eyes.

I'd never been the best at remembering faces, but it was even harder to differentiate between younger people. They all just kinda blended together. Why was it that as I got older, it became harder to distinguish kids from one another?

"Sorry, but I don't know who you are."

"I see..." she said, seemingly disappointed.

"That's rare," the other girl spoke up. "I've never really seen you interested in a guy before. You always look at the guys in our class like they're trash!"

"I just thought I recognized him, is all."

"Oh, let me tell you somethin'," the sociable girl said to me. "When she was in fifth grade, she saw...middle schoolers? Yeah, she saw a middle school couple kissing in a library, and it totally traumatized her, and now she hates guys!"

"Hey, he doesn't need to know that!"

Okay, so the look she's giving me is one of caution. But still, why did she think she recognized me?

"In that case, I'll have one of our female staff take care of you two after I take your order. Will that be okay?"

"Y-Yes, please."

Even while she was ordering, the man-hating girl kept staring at me. Yume shot me a look when I entered the staff area.

"Why were you talking to them for so long?"

"*They* were talking to me. But there aren't as many customers now, so it's not a big deal, right?"

"Uh-huh..." Yume glanced at the two girls. "They look like first-years."

"Yeah, probably."

"They're so small."

"Aren't they all at that age?"

"Do you like middle schoolers?"

"I'm gonna hit you."

It was true that I dated a middle schooler in the past, but that was when I was *also* a middle schooler. I wasn't interested in continuing this weird conversation and being accused of something that wasn't even remotely true, so I forcefully moved the direction back to work.

"When the food's ready, can you take it to them instead? The girl with long hair hates guys."

"Wow," she said flatly. "Even a girl who hates guys talked to you?"

"Drop it already."

I heard someone snickering and saw Madoka-san grinning at us. I

wished the two of them would learn from Chikuma, who was quietly blowing on his black tea before drinking it.

“Ah—”

Just as I thought that, Chikuma bumped his elbow into the table as he raised the cup to his mouth. The saucer slipped off and was just about to fall to the ground and shatter...until someone with incredible reflexes caught it. It was the girl who hated guys. She exhaled with relief and held the saucer up to Chikuma.

“Here. Be careful.”

“Uh...” Chikuma took it while responding in a soft voice.

“Sorry about that! Thanks! You tell her too, Chikuma!” Madokasan said.

His face was red from embarrassment, but he lifted his head and said, “Thank...you...”

She winced a little for some reason. “Whatever,” she coldly responded, before returning to her seat.

Apparently her hate towards guys extended to younger ones too. I thought back to the story I’d heard about her seeing a couple kiss as a fifth grader. Considering her age now, that would’ve meant it happened two years ago...

Then I started to realize something. *Two years ago? A couple? Kissing? Library? Elementary schooler?!*

“Uh...” It was on the tip of my tongue.

“The order for table two’s ready!” the chef called out, dispersing the weird thoughts floating around in my head.

How did that happen, again?

12:48 P.M.: Complimenting Other Girls Makes Me Feel Like I Lost

Mizuto Irido

“Huh? Akatsuki-san did?”

When our café temporarily closed for the lunch break, our kitchen staff started screaming about running out of ingredients and rushed out to the nearest supermarket. Meanwhile, Yume and I were heading to the designated changing rooms to get out of our costumes.

As we were making our way there, I received a mysterious message. Yume peeked at the screen of my phone.

Akatsuki☆: Higashira-san is mine now! If you want her back, come to the automated palm reader by the stage in the schoolyard.

“Akatsuki-san really likes this kind of thing, huh?” Yume mused.

“I already had plans to meet up with Isana anyway, so this works out, I guess. But also, what the heck is an automated palm reader?” Like, what was the point of that? Plus, did that mean some classes were automating their activities? At any rate, the two of us changed and were finally free from our costumes. I’d chosen to change back into my school uniform, but it seemed that Yume had had a different idea. She came out wearing the usual pleated uniform skirt with our yellow class T-shirt on top.

“Where’s *your* class T-shirt?” Yume asked, tilting her head.

“It’s underneath my uniform.”

I pulled back the collar of my shirt to show her. I’d talked to Isana about this before, but I wasn’t a huge fan of the whole class T-shirt culture. That being said, functionally, it wasn’t uncomfortable—plus I knew Yume would be annoying about it. Also, I knew that a certain someone hated class T-shirts even more than I, so I decided that the safest option would be to wear it underneath my clothes. We returned the costumes to our class before heading out to where Minami-san wanted us to meet up.

Going past the rows of outdoor class stalls in the school courtyard led to the stage. Performances such as plays or bands were split between here and the gym. But since it was lunchtime, no one was onstage. Walking around the now quiet guest area, we found an automated palm reader so hidden in the corner that it was easy to miss. There, in the shade of the tree, was Minami-san with her class T-shirt on and Isana, who was hunching her shoulders.

“We’re here. What’s...going on?” Yume asked.

“Th-This wasn’t my idea! Minami-san, just out of the blue...” Isana quietly wailed, her shoulders trembling as she faced the tree.

I looked at her and then glared at Minami-san. “Explain. Now.”

“God, you’re scary! Don’t get so mad! I just had her change her clothes! Do you really not trust me *that* much?!”

If anything, when have you ever done anything that’d make me trust you? But she was right. Isana wasn’t in her school uniform. Her upper half was covered by a dark cape, and her skirt was the color of green tea with a sort of apron on top of it—obviously not her school uniform. If anything, her outfit kind of resembled a waitress’s.

“Come on, Higashira-san! You went through the trouble of getting changed, so show it off! It’ll be okay, I promise! You look incredible! Yume-chan was so right!”

Isana screamed a little. “W-Wait, I-I’m not ready!” Isana protested as Minami-san forcefully turned her around.

Yume’s eyes sparkled and she clapped her hands together. “Wow! I’m so glad it fits!”

“It’s perfect! I was a little worried about her chest, but it’s all good!”

I hadn’t been too off base thinking that she was wearing a kind of waitress outfit. Though the cape was covering her chest area, I could still see that she was wearing a white blouse, and on top of that, there was an apron-looking garment that opened up around the chest area. It instantly gave off a very European vibe. *I’ve seen this before, haven’t I?*

“A...dirndl, was it?” I remembered the outfit that Madoka-san had tried to make Yume wear when we visited. I’d shut down the idea because of how exposed it left the chest area, but... Wait. “So that’s what the cape’s for.”

“There is something wrong with Germans if they are somehow able to walk around like this in public without being bothered! This is impossible for me!” Isana exclaimed, covering herself with the cape to hide her cleavage.

Minami-san giggled creepily as she rubbed Isana’s shoulders. “Relax. Sure, you’re exposing yourself a bit, but it’s a lot better than a swimsuit. You should be more confident! You look totally sex—I mean, cute!”

“You were about to say ‘sexy’! I know you were!” Isana exclaimed.

“You’re resisting so much, but you want Irido-kun to see, don’t you?”

“Urgh.”

“After all, you’ve awakened to the pleasures of having the person you like call you cute! If you really are *just* friends, though, you shouldn’t be so squeamish about him complimenting you, right? Should just go for it.”

“Urrrgh.”

“You’ve gotten really good at egging people on...” Yume commented through a wry smile.

Minami-san is always doing the most useless things. Well, whatever. Though annoyed, I decided to intervene.

“Don’t strong-arm her into this. You might both be girls, but it’s still sexual harass—”

“J-Just a little...” Isana said softly, glancing at me. “I-If it’s Mizuto-kun and for a very brief period of time then...I-I suppose it’s okay. Now that I think about it, I *did* spend time with you over summer break while wearing a tank top. This isn’t too different...right?”

“Don’t ask me...” I grumbled. She had a point, though. This was also a *lot* better than the time she wore my shirt.

Isana beckoned me over. Apparently, the only way to end this was to play along, so I approached her, but I felt Yume pull on my uniform’s sleeve.

“Make sure you compliment her, okay? Don’t just stare,” she whispered.

What do you want from me?! Yume let go of my hand, allowing me to continue my advance towards Isana. Minami-san moved away as if to say Isana was all mine. Now, it was just Isana and me in the shade of the tree cast by the mid-afternoon sun.

Isana’s eyes darted from side to side while she gripped the cape before she finally looked up at me. “O-Okay, then...I will begin.”

She undid the string of the cape with such majesty that even I began to feel a little nervous. *Seriously...what is going on here? What are we doing in broad daylight in the corner of the school courtyard?*

By the time I’d finished mentally posing these questions without answers, the cape around her chest had been undone. After that, no words were exchanged between us.

Well, this... I thought I was aware, but still, I was surprised by how much the dirndl exposed the chest and shoulders. It was especially surprising when someone like Isana, whose body was more mature than a typical high schooler’s, was wearing it.

Her cleavage fully exposed, her self-proclaimed G-cup breasts pushed out the frilly edges of the blouse. There was a small gap between the blouse and the chest area; if someone were to put their finger in there and pull it down, they could easily remove the blouse. Thinking about it like that, this wasn’t too different from the defenseless attire she’d worn during summer break. But such a simple village girl look actually really suited her.



“Wh-What do you think?” Isana asked, her eyes filled with uncertainty.

At that moment, there was only one emotion inside me: frustration. Isana would try to tease me by wearing outfits without really putting any thought behind them. It felt like a game—one that I always lost.

But I had to say something. It was the least I could do after she’d been forced to wear such an outfit. It took me a few seconds to find the right words to say, but it was stupid of me to have tried so hard when I wasn’t much of a wordsmith to begin with.

“It looks...pretty good. You look cute.”

“H-Huh?” Isana stared at me with surprise, blinked a bit, and then her cheeks gradually turned red. “R-Really?!”

“You know I’m not one to say things just to be nice.”

“By ‘cute,’ you don’t mean in the same sense that a dog or cat is —”

“I don’t.”

“I-If I may...what exactly about me is cute?”

“All of you. It’d be gross if I went into detail about each and every last part of you, wouldn’t it?”

Isana let out a sheepish giggle. I looked away, a strange sense of defeat filling me. *Great. So glad you’re happy.*

“Ehe. If this attire fits your tastes that much, then I will forgo the cape for a little. Ehe heh heh. I suppose I really have no choice. After all, you enjoy this outfit. Ehe heh heh!”

“By the way...”

“Yes?”

She was starting to get really full of herself, so I decided to give her a taste of reality. “Are you wearing a bra under that?” I asked, knowing full well she wasn’t.

Isana’s face froze in a smile before she slowly closed the cape around her.

“On second thought, I will keep it on.”

“Good idea, unless you want to be dragged to the guidance counselor’s office.”

Sheesh. I was right to have stopped Madoka-san from having Yume wear this. Seriously.

1:05 P.M.: The Complicated Girls

Yume Irido

“I know I set it all up, but are you sure this is okay, Yume-chan?”

Akatsuki-san whispered as we watched Higashira-san come back to her senses and put her cape back on as Mizuto looked at her with a soft smile.

“Yeah, why not?” I said with an ambiguous smile. “They’re always like this.”

“Well, yeah, true. Their feelings for each other can’t grow any stronger.”

I’d felt these conflicting and mysterious emotions many times before. Seeing Higashira-san happy made me happy, but also, I was jealous that it wasn’t me. It would’ve been uncomfortable if I still wasn’t sure about how I felt or where I stood, but now that I knew exactly what I wanted, I could accept those complicated feelings. After all, they were proof that I still liked him.

“You’ve really grown, Yume-chan. It’s hard to believe there was a time you’d get flustered to the point of tears by Irido-kun calling Higashira-san by her first name.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m *not* anxious about it...”

I’d simply learned methods to keep myself from being too influenced by said anxiety. I had to keep reassuring myself that everything would be okay. Take now for instance: Higashira-san may have been cute, but so was I. Mizuto had shown that he was really into my Taisho Roman costume. So I had nothing to worry about. Everything was fine. Higashira-san and I were on even footing.

“Think you can handle things on your own, now?” Akatsuki-san asked with a teasing giggle, in the sort of tone you’d use with a little kid.

As much as I wanted to say that she was more a child than I was height-wise, I swallowed my words instead and nodded. “Yeah, I’ll be okay. So why don’t you go to Kawanami-kun?”

“Why?! That extroverted jerk is definitely hanging out with his friends!”

All it took for her to start pouting and acting stubborn was for me to turn the tables and tease her a little. Despite trying to act mature, she wasn’t able to maintain that demeanor when it came to her own personal affairs.

“Don’t worry—you’ll get your chance. The cultural festival’s just started. Keep at it!”

“What exactly am I supposed to ‘keep at’?! But I guess...*if* I run into him, maybe I’ll bug him a bit.” Akatsuki-san looked away, but her ponytail was happily swinging like a dog’s tail.

1:10 P.M.: You Can’t Copy a Natural Seductress

Yume Irido

After Akatsuki-san left, the three of us decided to have lunch.

“Our class is closed right now, so should we try some of the outdoor stalls instead?”

“Yeah, I guess. They’re kinda pricey, but it’s not like any of us brought food.”

“O-Oh! I-if you two are truly okay with that—if you two are *truly* okay with that, may I strongly suggest we eat takoyaki?!”

Surprisingly, Higashira-san was a big fan of stall food. Despite that, she was too shy to go to any of these places by herself. *I totally get that.*

We lined up at the takoyaki stall and bought some from it one after another. Though it was more expensive than the frozen ones you’d get at the grocery store, we’d been given money to spend today, so we had no reason not to buy it.

“Careful. It’s hot.”

“Of course!” Higashira-san blew on the takoyaki a little before putting one in her mouth. “Haah, haah...” she exhaled, steam coming out of her mouth.

Higashira-san was a little taller than I, but seeing her mouth stuffed with takoyaki kind of reminded me of a squirrel. *Pretty cute. I’m lacking in the “adorable” department, now that I think about it. Okay, in that case...*

“Hot!” I exclaimed.

I’d purposely eaten one that hadn’t cooled down yet. I covered my mouth while Mizuto gave me a look as if to say, “Really?”

“Maybe you should take your own advice,” he said.

“I-It was hotter than I expected!”

I’d tried to play an airheaded character, but the takoyaki was so hot that I didn’t really have the chance. I might’ve burned my mouth. Meanwhile, Higashira-san was happily chomping away. When she went to swallow it, though, she began groaning and covering her mouth with her hand.

“I might have burned my tongue.”

“Are you okay?” Mizuto asked.

“Please take a look,” she said, sticking out her pink tongue for Mizuto to examine.

Uh... Huh?! I-Is that not embarrassing?! It seemed that I was the only one finding this strange, as Mizuto was calmly examining Higashira-san’s tongue.

“Yeah, it looks a little rough. I’ll get you something cold to drink.”

“Thank you...”

Sure, it’s kinda cute, and it might make one’s heart skip a beat, but... The tongue... The tongue, huh?

“Mi-Mizuto...?” I tugged on the hem of his uniform.

“Hm?”

All I had to do was open my mouth and stick out my tongue. *Stick out...my tongue...*

“N-Nothing...”

“Okay, then I’m gonna get a drink. Hold this for me?” he asked, giving me the tray with his takoyaki on it before going to a nearby drink stall.

I stood there, a feeling of depression welling up inside me as I held his tray with both hands. *It’s impossible. I can’t be like Higashira-san...*

“Is there something the matter, Yume-san? Haah, haah...”

“Can I ask you something? How does one become completely shameless?”

“Huh? Why do I get the feeling that I am being judged very extremely right now?”

1:18 P.M.: It Has Absolutely Nothing to Do with Me

Akatsuki Minami

“God, I’m bored...” Maki-chan said, sulking as she walked down the bustling halls. “What happened to our friendship?! I get that Irido-san has work, but Nasuka prioritized hanging out with her boyfriend over us!”

“What’re you gonna do? Their relationship is still fresh. We can’t interrupt the happiest phase of the relationship.”

“But she doesn’t even act like she likes him!”

Good point. When Nasuka-chan left to go see her boyfriend, she didn’t seem giddy, excited, or anything. She seemed neutral as always.

“Maybe she just looked calm on the outside, but was hiding how excited she really was.”

“Ew. Don’t say something so bittersweet! You’re gonna make *me* want a boyfriend!”

“Okay, okay, settle down. I’ll go out with you.”

“Oh, yay... I might not have gotten a boyfriend, but now I have a girlfriend... Let’s get all lovey-dovey, Akki...”

“Uh-huh. Lovey-dovey.”

I comforted Maki-chan as she hugged me. It was like petting a big dog. I knew how lonely it felt when a friend was taken from you. But neither Nasuka-chan nor Yume-chan were the kind of people who would toss away their friends just because they got boyfriends. We needed to support them.

Maki-chan and I walked around the festival. I laughed a bit when Maki-chan scarfed down some hot dogs to comfort herself and then we

went to the gym where people were performing.

“One of the upperclassmen in the basketball club made a band and is performing.”

“Do you like them?”

“Not really. But I figured I might as well watch a bit since everyone’s been fangirling about it.”

“Oh, so this is a popular, good-looking guy, then?”

“Nope. Girl.”

“Wowie.”

I’d been kinda curious what kind of popular traits made up this chimera who was both in a band and the basketball club, but nothing I’d imagined would’ve prepared me for the truth.

The stage sparkled in the midst of the dark gym while people packed in close to one another.

“Ugh, I can’t see.”

“Want me to hold you up?” Maki-chan asked as I was desperately trying to stand on my tippy-toes. She didn’t even wait for my response before she grabbed onto me.

Damn you! You think you can do this to me just because you’re tall? But also, I could see the stage now, where a class was dancing.

“Hm?” For a minute, I thought I saw a familiar head in the sea of people.

No, I’m not seeing things. I’d know that hair anywhere—it’s Kawanami. And next to him... No, whoever he’s with has nothing to do with me. It has absolutely nothing to do with me. Just because he was with Nishimura-san, a girl who hung around him a lot, didn’t mean that I had to involve myself. It had nothing—and I repeat, *absolutely nothing*—to do with me.

“My arms are tired. I’m puttin’ you down.” As Maki-chan set me down, she looked at my face. “Hm? You good? You look kinda pissed.”

“I’m fine.”

“Wait, are you mad because I held you up without waiting for you to say yes? I’m so sorry! I know how much being short bothers you! But I think being small is cute!”

“Stop trying to comfort me over something I’m not even bothered about!”

I’d already had a feeling that Nishimura-san was into him. It was obvious since he had to go to the bathroom a lot in the middle of their conversations. It meant he could sense her affection towards him. *Jeez, him and his stupid allergy.* Most girls would totally be put off by someone who got hives whenever they talked. It’d piss me off if I were in her shoes. *That’s why I always try to be careful...*

When the music ended, a portion of the audience moved to leave.

“Whoa, careful,” Maki-chan said, pulling me out of the way.

I saw *his* head in the sea of people leaving.

“Hm? Is that Kawanami and Nishimura?”

It looked like Kawanami was talking about something while Nishimura-san was giggling in response. Probably something stupid, the same sorts of things he’d talk about with me...

“Sheesh, I knew they were close, but they look like they’re datin—A-Akki? Y-You’re scaring me!”

“I *said* I’m fine,” I asserted.

“Are you, though?!”

Whatever was between them had nothing to do with me. I’d always known how popular he was. I’d also long known how big of a liar he was, dating back to when we were kids. Despite always saying that he’d rather be an observer than a participant in romance, it wasn’t at all surprising that he’d so easily gone on a date during the festival.

“Maki-chan, there’re less people now. Let’s move up.”

“O-Okay... It’s gonna be hard to get hyped over her band now, though...”

As I pulled her towards the stage, I heard a voice from outside the gym. “Oh, there you are, Kawanami!”

“Sheesh, I told you guys to stay close.”

“There were like a million people. Not our fault.”

I looked back and saw five people, including Kawanami and Nishimura-san. It was a mix of guys and girls all happily chatting one another up as they moved farther and farther away.

“Akki...?” Maki-chan said, looking at my face after seeing the same sight as me. “Close one, right? Aren’t you happy it wasn’t a date?”

“I don’t care...”

“God, am I really the only one out of you guys who doesn’t have anyone?”

“I told you—I don’t care about him!”

2:35 P.M.: Past and Present

Mizuto Irido

“Phew, I’m relieved we were able to escape. That was quite enjoyable!”

“Yeah. I was seriously surprised when I realized that all the answers up until the end had been hints to solve the final riddle.”

“The structure of the riddles wasn’t too uncommon, but they certainly did a good job.”

We left the escape room that we'd completed and began discussing it. We'd gone to a lot of different places so far, but that was definitely the highlight. We partially liked it because it'd been right up our alley, but also, it didn't try to cater to the cultural festival guests. They'd thought really carefully about what would yield the most entertainment. It'd simply been fun to go through.

"It was very fortunate that I had you and Yume-san there with me. I never would have been able to escape by myself."

"You can say that again. I thought it'd be easy since we're at a student-run cultural festival, but I was really surprised by how well thought-out it was."

"Precisely! I initially believed that it would be an extrovert-focused activity filled with inside jokes, during which the ineptitude of the puzzle design would be hidden by pep alone, but I was pleasantly surprised!"

"Is that really what you think of the cultural festival? Kinda a low opinion, don't you think?" Yume quipped.

Personally, I think she's got the right idea.

We continued walking around and ended up in the inner courtyard, where some third-years were in the middle of a performance. A few girls were bravely singing an anime song at the top of their lungs. Yume used this time to open the festival's pamphlet.

"Where should we go next? There are a lot of classes that have something in the afternoon."

Isana tilted her head and looked into the sky. "I am feeling somewhat burned out from the last activity we did."

"Yeah, maybe we should take a break."

"True. We have been walking around quite a bit. I'm gonna go to the bathroom real quick. Are you okay, Higashira-san?"

"Yes, I'm all right. Have a safe trip."

"I'll be right back, so stay around here, okay?" Yume said before going back inside.

We leaned against one of the pillars of the outdoor walkway while we waited, watching the group sing.

"Oh, Mizuto-kun," Isana suddenly crowed.

"Hm?"

As soon as I turned around, Isana quickly flashed her cleavage that was being held in place by the dirndl by pulling down on the collar of the cape.

"You addicted to doing that now?"

"Isn't it quite erotic to be the only one to witness such a sight, despite being surrounded by a crowd of people?"

"Please stop developing a new fetish..."

I shouldn't have complimented her. She didn't care about her allure anymore; she was just enjoying the situation.

She giggled, covering her mouth. "Feel free to copy my actions when in the presence of Yume-san."

"Guys don't have anything like that to show off."

"That isn't true. You simply do not understand. Both males and females are excited by glimpses of the chest."

"I'm not, though."

"Sure. I'll leave it at that out of respect for our friendship." She was really annoying when she got full of herself. "Well, even if you don't expose your chest to her, you should do something. You haven't really used this great opportunity to make any moves. I was of the understanding that you wanted to make her fall for you."

"Not at all. Being a committee member's been busier than I expected. It's especially bad for her since the committee head's taken a liking to her, so...I don't wanna get in her way."

"It...doesn't seem like you're making an excuse. But you should know that Yume-san wouldn't see it that way."

"That doesn't matter." *She shouldn't base her priorities on her feelings.*

"Hm..." Isana stared at my face, her lips curved downwards into a frown. "Tell me the truth. Are you thinking about something foolish again?"

"Nothing more stupid than what you were thinking a little while ago."

"The fact that you are able to understand someone as incredibly foolish and annoying as I is proof that you yourself possess an even more foolish and annoying personality!" *Can't argue with that.* "You are intelligent and are always taking into consideration your surroundings, but perhaps you ought to think about yourself first for once and put everything else on the back burner."

"You're probably right..."

But still, I couldn't change how I was. It was the method that I'd come up with since I was the only person I could trust. I couldn't bring myself to follow my nostalgic heart. How could I? It was filled with memories of failures.

"Hey, Isana, don't take what I'm about to ask too seriously, okay?"

"Okay?"

"What would you say if I said that I should've said yes to you?"

"I'd be furious."

"Thought as much," I scoffed a little. There was no way that things would be so convenient that—

"But," Isana said, looking intently into my eyes, "if you confessed to me now, I'd happily accept."

My eyes widened in surprise and I looked right at her. "What's the difference?"

"Well... I suppose it's a difference between the past and present?"

"Explain."

"It's similar to a game in which there's a difference between returning to a previous save in order to alter your choice and making a new choice altogether. It's as though everything that happened until then had never occurred in the first place. Instead, I'd much prefer it if you chose me *because* of the events that have transpired." *Oh, I get it. Listening to her explanations really helps. So simple to understand.* "I've changed quite a bit since meeting you, Mizuto-kun. I have come to like who I am a lot more after meeting you. So, if you were to choose me, I'd be happy to be your girlfriend, wife, or whatever. Then, one of those days, you'd bring me to your house, and we'd engage in sexual intercourse."

"You're putting your lust really out there."

"It is very important to me. Is it not for you?"

No. For me, what's important is— But once again, the words didn't follow. Though I knew that I didn't agree, I couldn't think of what was actually important to me.

"Oh, Mizuto-kun, by the way—"

"Excuse me," a low voice interrupted as Isana tried to ask me something.

In front of us was a jacket-clad guy, probably in his forties. Was he someone's parent? He had a very hotshot, businessman-esque air to him.

"I'm a little lost. Could I ask for directions?"

"Oh, sure."

I had an armband on, signifying I was a committee member, which he had probably noticed. I turned to help him, ignoring Isana, who was shrinking away with each passing second.

"Could you tell me where class 1-7 is?"

Our class? Though the coincidence caught me off guard, I still answered him as a committee member. "It's on the second floor of that building over there. It'll be the third classroom after you go up the stairs."

"Got it. Thanks. I appreciate it." Then he looked at Isana, who was hiding behind me. "You have a wonderful girlfriend. Be sure to treasure her," he said, smiling.

Isana jumped and squealed, possibly because she was suddenly called out. I felt her slightly tighten her grip on my shirt.

"Thanks again," he said before disappearing towards the school building.

Seems like a pretty nice guy. I wonder if he's someone's dad.

“Ehe heh heh... He called me your wonderful girlfriend, Mizuto-kun!”

“Oh yeah, how nice it’d be if you were.”

“Indeed! Wait, you of all people shouldn’t be saying that!” Isana angrily exclaimed.

I petted her on the head as I would a dog in order to calm her down. *Treasure her, huh? It’s not that easy.*

3:45 P.M.: The Two Types of People in the World

Yume Irido

After I got back from the bathroom, we resumed walking around the festival. We watched a band perform in the gym, went to the maid café of the guy who was really particular about them during the presentation, and before we knew it, the day was almost over.

“We should get going to help with preparations for the festival’s after-party,” I said.

“It’s already this late?” Mizuto groaned, looking at his phone.

There was going to be a bonfire tonight for the festival’s after-party. We’d be cleaning everything up tomorrow, so this was the last thing we had to do as committee members today.

Higashira-san looked extremely disappointed. “Oh... I suppose there’s no helping it if you must return to work.”

“What are you going to do now, Higashira-san? Are you going to celebrate with your class?”

“I don’t believe our class is doing any kind of collective celebration. Even if they were, I wouldn’t be caught dead there.” *Wow, she’s so resolute about that.* “Participating in the festival’s after-party is voluntary, if I remember correctly. Hm, I would like to see the big fire, but...”

That’s what you’re calling the bonfire? “Why don’t you stay until the end? You don’t have to dance or anything.”

“But how am I to keep myself amused without the company of you two? There is an eighty percent chance that I will return home.”

“Want me to hang out with you then?”

“Huh?” I turned to him with surprise.

Higashira-san’s face lit up. “Do you mean it?”

“Yeah, I won’t have any work after we finish the prep.”

“In that case, I will remain here! Please contact me when you’ve finished!” Higashira-san said happily before heading back to her class.

Mizuto’s face didn’t change at all as he watched her leave. But I couldn’t help but shoot him a confused look.

“Why did you promise that?”

“Promise what?”

“Don’t you remember that the committee members are having their own celebration during the festival’s after-party?”

All the committee members knew about this party beforehand. It was the real last event for all of us who’d worked so hard on the entire festival. There was no way that he didn’t know. After all, he’d even acknowledged the party when I’d brought it up before. I’d been relieved because I thought he’d warmed up to them enough to come to the party, but—

“Our class has its own wrap party too, after the one for committee members. You worked harder than anyone else, so you should definitely—”

“Is it work?” His voice was so devoid of emotion or anything at all. His eyes were empty voids that were focused on me. “Is the celebration or whatever work?”

“W-Well... No, but still—”

“Then it’s not mandatory, right?”

“B-But—” Before I realized it, I was gripping his uniform. I wanted to stop him—to hold onto him. “You need to at least say something to all the upperclassmen who helped out...right?”

“I can just do that tomorrow during the cleanup.”

“You *just* got closer to everyone. If you don’t go, you’ll be throwing that all away. They’ll think you’re an unsociable jerk. Is that really okay with you?!”

“I don’t see any problem.” He didn’t waver one bit. There wasn’t even a bit of emotion in his eyes. “We’re done working together. Doesn’t matter to me what they think.”

“Wait... You’re making it sound like you only acted friendly with them because of work.”

“No, that’s exactly it. Being friendly opens doors that would’ve otherwise been shut, making work easier. Even I know that, inexperienced as I am.” *What’s he saying?* It was as if I’d said those words out loud. Mizuto frowned. “We need to get going.”

“Yeah. Sorry.” I loosened my grip on his shirt and as soon as I did, I felt the distance between us instantly grow.

We saw each other when we went home. We took classes together. But tonight, I’d go to the committee member after-party, and he’d spend his time with Higashira-san. That’s all it took to make me feel as if this was all over. It was like there was an unscalable wall between the two of us.

“Oh, right.” Mizuto pulled on the collar of his shirt and looked at the yellow class T-shirt underneath. “Where do we return these to?”

“We...take them home.” *It’s supposed to be a memory. Isn’t that normal?*

“Right.”

It was at that moment I finally realized there were two types of people in this world. People who treasured their memories from the cultural festival, and others who couldn't wait to toss them in the garbage. We were opposites, in that regard.

“Sorry...”

I thought I heard his voice, but I was almost positive it'd just been in my head. After that, the two of us silently and solemnly walked off to finish our work.

Thank You

At our last middle school cultural festival, you were with your friends, laughing and enjoying yourself. *I* went to the roof as if I was running away from it all. It was only when I'd distanced myself from all the noise and looked down at the energetic festival that I began to calm down.

This is for the best. I'm okay with this. This is good for us. If anything, everything until then had been a mistake. It was like the early parts of *The Ugly Duckling*, when all the ducklings were together only because they were kids. I'm sure you would've said that you were the ugly duckling, but no, it was me. That's why it was better that *I* left.

How could the two of us possibly be together when we were so fundamentally different? *I'm sorry, Ayai. I'm so sorry.* All I could do was mentally apologize even though I knew that these weren't the words I needed to say.

Ever since last year, I'd been trying to define myself. I knew there was a wall between us, and yet, I dragged my feet on breaking up with you right up until graduation. The words you used to say, your quirks, everything you did... It all suddenly became unpleasant. Both love and hate coexisted inside me. I simultaneously liked you and hated you—that was the truth. As contradictory as that was, both feelings were legitimate.

It was frustrating. It was painful. It was sad. The internal strife born from that contradiction weighed on my mind so heavily. That's why I felt so relieved after we broke up. After all, if we weren't romantically involved anymore, the feelings I had for you weren't love—just hate.

With that, the contradiction and my internal strife disappeared. Maybe that's why I found it so much easier to be stepsiblings. After all, there was nothing to mull over if you hated a family member. Thus, I decided that I broke up with you because I hated you. That should've been the end of the story, but...

Everything got turned on its head that summer night. Seeing your face illuminated by the fireworks warped my definition of myself.

Tell me this is all fake. That it's just a dream. Otherwise, why did we break up? What had been the point of all the frustration, pain, and sorrow? I was supposed to have hated you, but why couldn't I get

your face out of my head?!

Kogure Kawanami

“The Rakuro High School Cultural Festival has now ended. Thank you for coming.”

I deeply exhaled when I heard the announcement play from the PA system. We’d run out of tea leaves, coffee beans, various other ingredients, and time. Finally, it was time for the busy-as-hell cultural festival to come to an end. It felt like we’d just gotten off a shift at a real job. Fortunately, our café was free of any annoying bosses or senior coworkers, so working hadn’t actually been all that bad.

“Here.” A cold can was pressed against my cheek as I spaced out at one of the empty tables.

I turned around to see Akatsuki, who was wearing the class T-shirt. The little shrimp went to the other side of the table, sat across from me, and opened her can of orange juice.

I looked down at what she’d given me. “After serving freshly ground coffee all day, I get mine in a *can*?”

“Yeah, figured you’d want some right about now.”

“Thanks.”

As much as I hated to admit it, she knew me pretty well. While soaking in the energy of the room, I pulled back the tab of the can and savored the bitter, acidic flavor of the coffee—a flavor that could hardly be considered high-quality.

The Sakamizu girl, who hung out a lot with Akatsuki and Iridosan, had gone on a convenience store run and brought back bags filled with drinks and snacks. I figured this coffee was from that.

“So, how was the festival?” Akatsuki asked amidst the excited voices of our classmates.

Weirdly enough, her words were crystal clear to me despite all the noise, probably because I was so used to her voice.

“I had a good time, especially in the escape room from the second-years. That was godlike.”

“Oh, you went there too? I tried it with Maki-chan, but we didn’t make it out in time.”

“Your height’s not the only thing that’s stunted, huh? Even *I* escaped with my group.”

“I think *stunning* is the word you’re looking for. Also, there were only the two of us. We didn’t have five people like you!”

“Hm? Did I mention how many people I was hanging out with?”

“Oh, uh...” Akatsuki awkwardly averted her gaze.

Did we pass by each other at some point? “Speaking of hanging out, though, I wonder how the Irido siblings did. Things were so busy with our class that I didn’t have time to egg ‘em on.”

“You didn’t have to. They went on their festival date anyway...well, with Higashira-san in tow.”

“Huh?! What the hell’s her problem? She crashed their date?!”

“It’s not her fault Irido-kun is so overprotective. He couldn’t leave her by herself.”

“Sure, but still...”

“Well, they were able to spend some time together when they went on their rounds, so isn’t that good enough?”

Sheesh, those siblings are such a pain. But then again, this stage of anguish and anxiety was the most delicious part of romance.

“There’s still the festival’s after-party too. Higashira’s probably not gonna stay for that,” I said.

“True... They shouldn’t really have any other committee work either.” *The after-party, huh? What should I do?* “Hey, um... Do you...have any plans for the after-party?” she asked as if she’d read my mind.

“Not really.”

“I thought you were ‘Mr. Popular’? You’re telling me *nobody’s* invited you? Not even...Nishimura-san?”

“Are you tryin’ to pick a fight? If someone invited me, they might as well be asking me out. I’d be lyin’ on a bed in the nurse’s office right about now if that happened.”

“Then, you, uh...you should go with me.” Akatsuki—A-chan—said, the rays from the setting sun on her back. There were faint shadows over her eyes as she peered up at me. I felt the skin on my arm begin to react. *Asking me out...* “This way, you can at least enjoy yourself without worrying about barfing your guts out.”

“Huh?”

“As your childhood friend, I’m your girl repellent. It’s partially my fault that you’re the way you are now, so this is the least I could do. Huh?” Akatsuki tilted her head at my clear confusion and began grinning teasingly. “Oh? Did you think I was about to ask you out?”

“Hell no!”

“God, you’re so full of yourself! Creep.”

“Shaddup!”

Akatsuki began snickering triumphantly. *Now who’s the one full of themselves? Dammit.*

Yume Irido

“The Rakuro High School Cultural Festival has now ended. Thank you for coming.”

The visitors exited through the main gate as the announcement rang into the night sky. Checking my phone, I saw that I’d gotten a message.

Madoka: We're gonna go now. We had a good time!

In the meantime, people were energetically preparing for the festival's after-party. They were taking apart some of the outdoor stalls to make space in the courtyard for the logs that they were piling on top of one another in preparation for the bonfire.

Mizuto, while not the center of attention or anything, was among the people working. Though he was smiling, *I* knew that it wasn't genuine.

Maybe I'd been conceited. I thought that I'd begun to understand him a little better during our family trip. That's why I'd gotten a big head and thought that maybe *I* could be the one to save him. But I'd failed to realize that he'd never once asked to be saved, or anything.

I'd been too blind to realize that those were all things *I* wanted. It felt good when the person I liked—my stepsibling, my ex—was recognized by others. I'd tried to use him to fulfill my stupid desire to be validated.

Even now, Mizuto continued to play along. He'd tried so hard not to make any waves so that I could look good. He'd suppressed who he really was for my sake so that I could live out my stupid fantasy. All of this was now crystal clear.

I understood why he'd always quickly finished his committee work, why he'd run off to Higashira-san at the drop of a hat. He wasn't being considerate of her isolation; no, it was because he could be himself in front of her. He didn't have to try and be considerate to her. It was supposed to be that way with us—with family—but I'd become one of the people he needed to put a mask on to interact with.

I felt sick at my own foolishness. I couldn't even cry; it'd be too presumptuous. We were so far apart, emotionally. I'd thought that I'd finally caught up to him, but he was completely out of reach. *It feels stupid to even be so in love with him.*

Mizuto Irido

"It was so humiliating..."

I'd met up with Isana after finishing the prep for the after-party, but her face was red, and she was trembling for some reason. She'd changed back into her school uniform and was clutching a paper bag against her chest. *I guess the dirndl's inside that... Oh no.*

"Wait...don't tell me you wore that costume in your classroom..."

"I'd completely forgotten I was wearing it! It was only once my classmates pointed it out that I became aware of the situation. They teased me so much, saying that I was cute, that it looked good on me, and asking if it was what my boyfriend's into!"

“That’s not teasing. Those are all pretty much compliments except — Hang on, why was I dragged into this?” In the age of social media, rumors spread like wildfire. *Ugh, whatever.*

Isana pressed the bag against me. “Please return these to Yume-san. I wanted to wash them first, but I’m not certain how to go about that.”

“Sure.”

“Please limit yourself when trying to inhale my scent.”

“Keep dreaming. I’m not you.”

“Wh-Whatever could you be talking about?”

Rich words coming from a person who shamelessly sniffed the hell out of my pillow.

“Should we get going?”

“Indeed! This will be my first time at a bonfire. Is dancing obligatory?”

“It’s not, but some people like to. It might just be fun to watch the fire, kinda like watching the bonfires at temples.”

“Oh, true! Huge flames invigorate the soul!”

“I’m making a mental note to never let you get fire powers.”

Just as Isana began walking to go down the stairs, I grabbed her by the arm. “Wait. Wrong way.”

“Huh? But it’s in the courtyard, isn’t it?”

“I know a better place for us.”

She blinked in confusion as I smiled. I’d worked so hard. I deserved a little reward.

Yume Irido

“Okay, committee members, congratulations on a festival well done!” Kurenai-senpai said, leading the toast as the committee head.

“Congrats!”

The sound of glasses clinking against each other mixed with the voices of everyone cheering. The meeting room that we’d been using as our base of operations was now filled with snacks and drinks that the upperclassmen had bought. It looked pretty quaint for a celebration, but there was a second venue for the *real* wrap party at an actual restaurant. In short, this was just the pre-celebration.

A group of girls including Yasuda-senpai came over to talk to me.

“I gotta say Yume-chan, your class’s Taisho Roman café was great! I’m so glad I went!”

“Th-Thank you.”

“Hm? Where’s your little brother?”

“Oh, he’s...busy with something else.”

“Really? That sucks. I wanted to talk to him a little more.”

Thanks to them, I wasn’t being a wallflower, but that didn’t

change the fact that I felt like there was a gaping hole in my chest. It wouldn't have been possible for the old me to come to this kind of gathering and talk to my upperclassmen. It would've taken everything I had to even find a place to stand.

I was supposed to have matured. To have become stronger, more competent. More capable of living like a normal person. But, then...why did I feel so empty inside? Even though I was surrounded by all these people, there was such a huge void left by the absence of one person.

"Hello there, Yume-kun. Job well done."

"Oh, hello. You did a great job too, especially as the committee leader," I replied to Kurenai-senpai as she sat next to me.

It was all so sudden that I couldn't help but tense up. There were so many other people to speak to, so why had she chosen me? She didn't even look at the snacks in front of her and kept staring right at me, smiling.

"Well, I won't be the committee leader for too much longer."

"Should I call you 'vice president,' then?"

"That's coming to an end as well. You'll need to call me '*president*' soon enough," the future student council president, Suzuri Kurenai, said with a chuckle.

Amazing. She didn't have any doubts about becoming the student council president. I wished I could've become someone so filled with confidence, like her. I could only adopt these kinds of skills—I could never come *close* to the real deal.

After the festival officially concluded, I wouldn't have any opportunities to interact with Kurenai-senpai. I'd just become another random student who looked up to her. Thinking about it like that made me feel a little sad.

"By the way, I haven't seen your younger brother. Is he around?" Kurenai-senpai asked, looking next to me.

"No, he—"

Just as I began to repeat the same prepared explanation that I'd already said countless times today, she interrupted. "He really is *that* type of person, huh?" she muttered as if she were talking to herself. *What does she mean by that?* "I can't help but feel responsible. I'd certainly considered it a possibility, but I thought it'd be better to interact with him than leave him alone."

"U-Uh, wait. Slow down. I'm not sure where you're going with this."

"Oh, apologies. I'm talking about when I asked you to try and involve him more with the rest of the group," she remarked. "I could already tell from how he acted during the presentation that he wasn't a big fan of groups. But being a lone wolf is detrimental to efficiency,

and he is an exceptionally talented individual who I couldn't bear to leave alone, so I had you try and bridge the gap. I suppose there *was* a chance that he was the type to easily succumb to loneliness, but it seems my first assumption was right, and being in a group causes him stress. It wasn't right of me to try and force him to join an uncomfortable environment, especially when he wasn't even getting paid to do so."

"Senpai...you knew the entire time?" *I only just realized.* From the start, I'd been interpreting things to suit my own convenience, painting him as a secretly lonely person. But she...

"Oh, no. Not me."

"Huh?"

She began smiling proudly. "It would seem that I am quite arrogant and clueless as to how others feel. I'm the type who thinks that it's *always* faster if I do something myself. Unfortunately, despite this self-awareness, I've been unable to change."

"Uh-huh..."

"That's why I leave all that kind of stuff to Joe. He was the one who analyzed your little brother too, as part of his job."

Joe? Haba-senpai? The treasurer? The guy with an unusually low presence who's always with her? I glanced over to the corner of the room where he was sipping juice by himself. Kurenai-senpai looked at him too before continuing.

"He may be severely lacking in conversational skills, but in exchange, he's an expert at observation. He's unrivaled when it comes to identifying the strengths of others." She sounded proud. I had no time to even nod before she continued. "Maybe that's why he tends to undervalue himself so much. I'd say it's his only flaw. When speaking about Mizuto Irido-kun, he said that it annoyed him how it was like looking at an improved version of himself. I wholeheartedly disagree with his evaluation, though."

No, you should agree. Mizuto is way better than he. But I decided not to say that out loud. I had manners.

"Maybe that's why I asked you to try and have your little brother become friends with the other committee members. I even felt a little sympathetic for Mizuto Irido-kun, since Joe is the type who is secretly lonely, deep down. I thought it was rare for Joe to be off the mark about his read on someone, so maybe if he thought that your little brother was the same as he..."

After listening to her speech, I began thinking about a certain possibility. Could Haba-senpai have been the one who wanted Mizuto to become friends with the other committee members through me? If that was the rare error he made, then maybe...

"Um...is it..."

“Hm?”

“Is it possible that he wanted to separate the two of you? You *were* talking to him quite a bit.”

“Huh...?” she tilted her head in confusion. It was the first time I saw her make this expression. “He wanted to separate me from whom?”

“Mizuto and you...or at least, that’s what I think.”

“Hmmm?”

I can tell you want more of an explanation, but please don’t make me spell it out for you! “What I mean is that...Haba-senpai thinks that Mizuto is a higher-spec version of him, right? How do you think he’d feel if that kind of guy suddenly appears out of nowhere, and you begin aggressively trying to interact with him? He’d feel anxious.”

“Anxious? Joe would? Why?”

“B-Because he’s jealous!” *Argh, you’re making me embarrassed!*

Kurenai-senpai’s head had yet to return to its upright position.

“Jealous...?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Because of...me?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Ha ha ha... No way. Not a chance.”

God, you’re so annoying! “That’s *definitely* what’s happening here! Sure, he’s not exactly the expressive type, but his ears turned red when you two were in that empty classroom!”

“Hm? W-Wait a second.”

“Huh? Okay.”

“You...saw? You saw what happened in the classroom?”

“Oh...” *Oh god. Oh no. How could I have been so careless?!* “S-Sorry! I heard your voices just as I left the room.”

Kurenai-senpai turned away from me, hiding her face. “No, it’s okay. If anything, it was our fault for hiding there in the first place.” Then she returned to her usual self, but I noticed that her ears had turned red too, just like Haba-senpai’s had. “However, let me be clear: I am by no means *that* indecent of a girl! It’s just... It’s as if he never reacts to me, no matter what I do...”

She really is a girl. Well, I mean, of course she is, but still. It was surprising that someone this smart, hailed as a genius, could get this bashful. She was even aware of how embarrassing what she had done was. That meant she could only act that way in front of Haba-senpai.

“Um...could I ask you something, if you don’t mind too much?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you like Haba-senpai...romantically?”

Kurenai-senpai, still slightly flushed, turned around. “I never said that I *liked* him.”

“Well...okay, then. What makes you want to be with him?”

I won't press her on liking him, but, uh, what other interpretation is there? Telling him you fell for him doesn't really leave too much room for interpretation! She'd clearly articulated her ideals to him. There must've been a reason if all of that had just been an act she put on specifically for Haba-senpai, though. Maybe I was just trying to run away from reality. All I wanted right now was to listen to someone else talk about romance.

She tilted her glass a little, the ice almost completely melted. “There isn't a big reason or anything. There was simply a guy lacking any presence, and a girl who, coincidentally, noticed how talented he was. The inexperienced and arrogant girl was seduced by said coincidence. The end.” *“Inexperienced and arrogant”? Sounds like me.* “I made a huge mistake in middle school, which was the result of me believing that I was perfect and always correct. I experienced what's known as increased self-consciousness—completely normal for those at a young age. So I began searching for someone who could make up for that flaw of mine. It was then that I happened to find a certain introvert, by chance, who really let me have it. ‘What is *wrong* with you? I'm the type who's just fine being left alone. Everyone *but* you understands that. How can you *not* understand that when you're so smart?’ he'd said. Imagine my shock when, despite thinking that I was the only one who understood, I discovered I knew nothing at all. Even more shocking still was the fact that I *could* be shocked. It felt like I'd been pierced through the softest part of my heart.”

“But...even after all of that, you didn't distance yourself from him?”

“Of course not! I was infuriated! How could such an asocial person snap at *me*?! But also...I could tell this was the peer that I was looking for. So, I decided I'd get him in my clutches, even if that meant resorting to seduction.” Her eyes moved right to Haba-senpai.

It was easy for anyone to lose track of a person with as faint a presence as his in a crowded room like this, but not Kurenai-senpai. Her eyes practically homed in on him. She found him in an instant, as she always did. No matter how many people were around, she would never lose sight of him.

“It's truly infuriating. He's the *only* person I've ever met who never notices me looking at them.”

I giggled a little at her pouting. Sitting right here wasn't a second-year or a genius, but a girl troubled by her first love.

“I can't believe I spoke about such embarrassing things in front of my underclassman!” she exclaimed, angrily gulping down her drink.

“There's nothing to be embarrassed about. Everyone goes through stuff like this.”

“In that case, I truly respect the human race.”

I can't agree more. There wasn't a single perfect person in this world. The fact that someone this smart and capable was still this flawed was proof of that. But knowing these flaws wouldn't help you get closer to someone, not even your ex.

“Oh, looks like they're about to start!” someone exclaimed as they looked out the window.

Many crowded around to watch, while others rushed out to the courtyard. The windows turned a light red. The bonfire must have been lit.

“Why don't you go with Haba-senpai?” I asked while looking at the window. “He's actually a lonely guy, right?”

“Yume-kun, are you perhaps looking down on me all of a sudden?”

“Oh no, don't interpret it like that. Take it as a sign of how close we're getting.”

Kurenai-senpai sighed and stood up. “Well, I suppose it isn't too bad to have an underclassman like you.”

“Huh?”

“To be honest, I didn't strike up a conversation with you to talk about romance.” She gave me a serious look before continuing.

“Yume-kun, I've a favor to ask of you as the next student council president.”

As soon as I heard her “favor” I realized that my destiny had already changed, long ago.

Mizuto Irido

“Wow!” After exiting through the door and looking around, Isana turned her gaze to the night sky. The autumn breeze blew past us. We were on the roof of the school—a place far from the noise, the lights, and the people. “This is my first time up here. I had no idea it even existed.”

“Yeah, it's usually locked, but they've apparently been allowing committee members up here. I kinda wandered here in the morning and thought it'd be possible to see the bonfire.”

Looking down through the fence, you could easily see the freshly lit bonfire in the middle of the courtyard. The flames danced as the wood crackled.

“It may look small from up here, but it's quiet, right? Also, we won't have to worry about being the subject of any weird rumors.”

“That's true. I feel much more comfortable up here. Heh heh! They look like ants.”

“You're certainly excited.”

It might have been quiet up here, but in exchange, it was cold. To

make up for that, I'd bought cans of hot milk tea and hot coffee from a vending machine.

"Here," I said, handing her a can.

"Thank you."

She pulled back the tab and then began sipping, letting the warmth seep into her hands. I opened my can too, and began drinking while looking at the courtyard below. There was a crowd of people around the fire. They didn't really look like ants from up here, but it *was* hard to distinguish each of them individually.

"The cultural festival was fairly entertaining," she mused. "This may be the first time that I've properly enjoyed it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Hm, how do I explain...? Though I may not have personally partaken in the activities, I still found enjoyment in observing the liveliness of the festival."

"It's crazy how on the same page we are."

To be honest, if it wasn't for the forced cooperation, I probably wouldn't have had any negative feelings towards the cultural festival. It was fun to see a different atmosphere envelop the school. I highly doubted that others would've been too accepting of the idea of me standing on the side, watching them like animals in a zoo, though.

"What'd you do in middle school?" I asked.

"I mostly remained in my classroom and read light novels. What about you?"

"Yeah, I read books in my classroom too. I think I was reading Kyusaku Yumeno back then."

"Oh, last year I was reading a web novel that's yet to receive a physical release."

"That still counts as a light novel in your world, right?"

"Indeed." She nodded. "I wonder why the cultural festival makes me want to reread books rather than read something new."

"No clue. Maybe it's so you don't lose sight of yourself in the changing environment."

"Also, I wonder why it makes me want to read something niche and edgy. Do you know why?"

"Why would I? Maybe it's your small way of asserting yourself?"

"But even if you read a web novel on your phone, nobody can really tell what you're doing anyway. It's strange, isn't it?"

I began thinking back to last year's cultural festival. Was that when I had read Kyusaku Yumeno? No, it couldn't have been. After all, just seeing the "Yume" part of his name made me feel self-conscious. It had to have been the year before that, my second year of middle school. When I started dating *her*.

Since we'd decided to hide that we were dating, we didn't even

consider going around the festival together. But, honestly, I'd hoped to spend that time together with the first girlfriend of my life. Deep down, I must have admired that kind of couple's activity. Maybe my choice of author had been my own small way of asserting myself. Maybe the reason that I'd picked a book with the words "Kyusaku Yumeno" boldly printed on the cover for everyone to see was—

"By the way," Isana asked, breaking my train of thought. "When will Yume-san be arriving?"

Her question made me freeze, but I wasn't sure why. *Oh, I see. This isn't a weird question for Isana.* I'd never said it'd just be the two of us. She must've thought that Yume would be here, since we'd gone around the festival together. But still, why did it feel like she'd struck a nerve?

"I forgot to mention, but she's not coming. She's at the committee members' wrap party."

"Oh, I see. Hm..." Isana looked down at her can as she mulled over what she wanted to say. But it seemed like she gave up because she kept her mouth shut.

I already knew what was on the tip of her tongue. "Did you want to ask why I'm not there with her?"

"Yes, but...I put myself in your shoes, and I doubt I would've attended either. It doesn't seem very enjoyable."

She really gets me. I couldn't have been more thankful that I'd met Isana despite being in different classes. I'd gotten incredibly lucky, but —

Before I could finish my thought, Isana continued. "However, don't you think Yume-san is lonely?"

As lucky as I was, she was also my greatest challenge. She understood me better than anyone else did and shared my feelings. I couldn't hide anything from her. Not too long ago, she may have been more reserved with her opinions, but I'd recently proven to her that she and I really weren't all too different. She didn't need to hold back around me, and she knew that.

"Knowing her, I've no doubt that she is doing well in the company of the other committee members, and I'm certain she is enjoying her time at the celebration. However...it must be lonely for her if the individual she wishes to be with most isn't present."

"And that's me?"

"Shouldn't you know better than anyone? You simply don't wish to recognize it."

She might be right. But also, she might be wrong. Still, though... "So what? You want me to go somewhere I don't even want to be and leave you by yourself?"

"Do you not wish to?"

“Of course not. Just so you know, I treasure you quite a bit.”

“Heh heh. That makes me so happy,” Isana pressed her lips to the can. “However, I believe she would prefer to be with you—the person she’s worked hard with over the past few weeks. This is, of course, nothing more than my own assumption, though.”

“Even if that’s true...” The black of the night sky was slightly tinged red by the flames below. “I think it’s best if she learns to overcome that loneliness.”

Yume Irido

Ultimately, I ended up in the courtyard, just like the other committee members, only alone and in the back of the crowd. The red flames of the bonfire rose, the embers twinkling like stars as they danced in the air.

A familiar face caught my eye as I silently watched the fire burn. It was Akatsuki-san.

“A—” Just as I went to call out to her, I noticed Kawanami-kun next to her and stopped myself.

They seemed to be talking about something. They weren’t holding hands or anything, but they were close enough that they could probably faintly feel the warmth of the other’s body and breath. Their eyes met as they spoke, but when the conversation ended, they went back to the flames.

But I could tell from where I was standing that when Kawanami-kun was looking at the fire, Akatsuki-san’s gaze was on him, and vice versa. Reflected in their eyes was the side profile of the other, reddened by the light of the fire.

Mizuto Irido

“So, you believe that your decision is concurrent with what is best for Yume-san?” Isana’s question was so direct that it left no wiggle room. All I could do was honestly nod, affirming her inquiry.

“She and I are fundamentally different people,” I said as I watched the embers flicker in the wind. “We only *look* compatible. We both like books, but the genres we like are completely different. Not to mention, back then, she wasn’t alone by choice like I was. It’s only natural that we’d eventually fall into different groups of people as she grew. We’re just two people who happened to temporarily be in the same place at the same time. Completely coincidental.”

This was something I’d probably already realized a year ago but desperately didn’t want to admit. No matter how tough things got, I had no intention of changing who I was.

“You know how protagonists usually mature in stories? Maybe

they start out as a loner but gain lots of friends, or maybe they're looked down on as incompetent, but end up standing at the top—either way, I could never identify with them. What they considered to be maturity and growth was actually nothing more than them destroying who they'd been. Do I want friends so badly that I'd destroy myself in the process? Do I want to stand at the top? If that's what people consider growth, then what does that make me, someone who's completely satisfied being friendless? What does that mean for me when I'm fine being at the bottom? Is growth *really* that necessary?"

There was no part of me that I could bring myself to destroy. No part that I wanted to grow. I'd thought this through many, many times, and I had no ideals, no goals. All that had ever come to mind were things I *shouldn't* strive to be, but nothing I felt I should actively pursue. Most people might want to write after reading a lot of books, but not me. I knew I couldn't produce anything. I was nothing but a patchwork human, put together using the lives of others that I'd pilfered from the books I'd read.

How was someone expected to level up when they didn't even have a level to begin with? So many books depict growth, but they never include the kinds of people who don't have the ability to grow in the first place. Instead, they ignore them and make it seem as if anyone is capable of growth. It'd be great if they'd recognize that there are those who are not among that number.

"I've always been like this," I continued. "I can get better at things, but I don't grow as a person. No matter what happens, I can't change who I am, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that. Over the past six months, I've come to realize that this is just how I was born."

After realizing that I felt fine even if I didn't do anything for my birthday, Christmas, or Valentine's Day, it had become so clear that Ayai and I were different.

"I don't feel bad about it. I don't feel inferior by any means either. I'm just *different*. You get what I mean, don't you, Isana? People who don't care about maturing exist, and there will never be an understanding between us and the other type, because we're different at our cores."

"Yes, I understand." Isana decisively nodded. I felt so relieved from her agreeing with me. "I too was quite hurt by how others couldn't understand that I was simply different—that is, until I met you..."

"Right? So—"

"However," Isana interrupted and looked straight into my eyes, stopping me from saying another word. "Please hear me out. I agree

that you and Yume-san are different. Her thought process, her lifestyle, her comprehension—everything about her is different from you on a fundamental level. If you were to follow my mother's advice, which is that only those who are similar should get married, then you and Yume-san should never tie the knot. That being said...it doesn't mean that you are forbidden from falling in love with her."

"Why not?"

"For instance, if either you or Yume-san possessed the kind of rigid personality that made you unable to understand others, then, yes, there would be no chance of your relationship working out. Consider this, though: heterosexual people and homosexual people can still be friends, can't they? They may not fall in love with the same kind of people, but they can understand each other. Am I wrong?"

"No...you're not."

In my case, that would be like how Yume likes mystery novels way more than I do. Despite that, I never had any trouble listening to her talk about them. I may have had difficulties sharing her excitement for them, but spending that time with her didn't feel like a...

"Regardless of where you were born, what environment you grew up in, how you think or live—people who are completely different can still fall in love. There are, no doubt, *countless* examples in the world. I'm sure they've even appeared in many of the books you've read. Despite that, how could you think that it's not possible for you?"

I had no response. *Sheesh, Isana, you're completely right.* She hit the nail on the head, driving home the fact that she was Natora-san's daughter. That's exactly why I understood that I could not be convinced by reasonable arguments. I was too twisted.

"Tell me, Isana, what does 'love' mean?" This was most definitely a question I'd been hiding from myself. "You say that people who are completely different can fall in love, but is that possible for a person who doesn't even know what 'love' is?"

Yume Irido

I sat down on a bench in the corner of the courtyard and gazed at the students who were living it up around the bonfire. Akatsuki-san and Kawanami-kun were there—Kurenai-senpai and Haba-senpai too. As they happily chatted away, their eyes went back and forth between focusing on the rising flames and the person next to them.

Mizuto Irido

None of it had been fake. Both the time that I'd spent with Ayai

and the feelings I'd held for her had been real. But even so, I'd spent half a year irritated with the person I was supposed to have loved. It'd gotten to the point where it hurt to even look at her. That time was more than enough for me to become confused about the feelings that I'd been so sure of in the past.

I looked down at the bonfire and the students gathered around it. "Honestly, I'm not sure even you would understand what I'm going through. I feel like an idiot. Like, what was I even doing up until now? Whatever it was, it feels so completely and utterly stupid. As soon as someone gets this way, though, it's over. It's too late. Nothing makes sense anymore. I can't help but doubt my feelings. Were they real or just some kind of flight of fancy?"

The more I thought about it the more lost I felt. I was going in circles. It wasn't about understanding or being understood. I simply had no clue who *I* was as a person.

"Do you have an answer, Isana? Could you explain what this 'love' that everyone babbles on about is?"

There was no way she could. That's why I'd said it, but Isana looked up to the sky and began seriously thinking. "Allow me to explain from my perspective."

"Huh?"

I'd forgotten that though we were cut from the same cloth, we weren't even close to being the same person.

"I'm going to begin going over how I realized I liked you, Mizutokun. By the way...this will be extremely embarrassing, so I ask that you refrain from pressing me any further on the matter." I shut my mouth and watched as Isana, who was still looking into the sky, continued. "It wasn't until Yume-san and Minami-san pointed it out to me that I truly realized my feelings for you. After that, it dawned on me that I certainly did want to go on dates and do dirty things with you. But more than that, the deeper I thought about everything, the more that something that surpassed all of that, and that was your face. More specifically, your profile. I was surprised to find how well I knew what you look like from the side, perhaps from the times I watched you read in the library or when we walked home together. I realized just how much my eyes had been focused on your face when it wasn't even turned towards me."

I saw her nervous face as she stared right at the camera while wearing the Taisho Roman outfit that suited her so well. I saw her working late into the night at her desk on our class's proposal.

I saw the serious look she had on as she glared at the computer screen as data began populating. I saw her comfortably speaking with our upperclassman while holding posters. I saw her chuckle at me when we

held hands in the haunted house. I saw her face slightly twist in pain when she stopped walking for a split second.

“So, as simple as it may seem...I believe that the person you love is the one whose side profile you find yourself looking at the most.”

Yume Irido

I began thinking about all the times that I'd seen Mizuto's side profile today.

I saw him looking down at the courtyard from the roof. In the haunted house, despite how dark it was, I could tell that his ears turned red during our hug. He examined my shoe bite with an unconcerned look on his face. He actually smiled while perfectly serving customers. It looked so genuine that his usual scowl seemed like a lie.

I might have misinterpreted some of it, but either way, these things had objectively all happened.

He frowned a little when he had to deal with Madoka-san. He seemed a little frustrated when he saw Higashira-san's cosplay. He seemed calm and collected as we went through the escape room puzzles.

Mizuto Irido

I saw her continue to diligently serve customers despite how busy she got. I saw her look at Chikuma as if she were his real sister. I saw her furrowed brow as she stared at the puzzles in the escape room.

Memory after memory gushed out in surging waves. *I remember. I remember each and every time, even if I hadn't intended to commit them to memory. I didn't intentionally look at her, but I did.* But somehow—unnecessarily and arbitrarily—I'd been looking at her so much. I felt dizzy. My vision was going black. What should I do? What was I supposed to do?! I had no clue. How could I? After all, I hadn't consciously done anything.

“By the way, there's something I've been meaning to ask you,” Isana asked suddenly as she leaned back against the fence. “Who confessed to whom in middle school?”

I smiled bitterly, as if to mock myself. “You really think I would confess to anyone?”

“Then what about who invited who out on your first date?”

“She did.”

“What about your first kiss?”

“She initiated it.”

“What about your first tim—”

“That never happened, and you know it.” Though, technically, we'd tried, but it didn't work out. I'd been the one to create the situation but I'd also been the one who failed to follow through. “I

guess I've always been passive," I reflected. "I'm never the one to start things. All I did was reap the benefits of her hard work. I just enjoyed the situations she handed to me. Even when things got rough between the two of us, she very nearly brought things back to normal. In contrast...I couldn't do anything."

It was a long string of self-hate. I couldn't accept who I was. I couldn't forgive how the world enabled me to be this way. More than anything, I couldn't forgive myself for getting her involved in my self-hate. Thinking about it now, I'd been relying on her.

I'd been relying on *her* efforts. I'd been relying on *her* kindness. Maybe that's why I couldn't accept when she was nice to other people, even if they were just friends. For the entire year and a half we dated, I hadn't contributed or accomplished anything as Yume Ayai's boyfriend.

"I see. In that case, may I ask one more question?" She sounded like a detective in a TV show. "Who initiated the first conversation?"

"Do you like mystery novels?" I'd said. I would never forget that.

It was simultaneously the memory I loathed the most and the one that I could never bring myself to forget. It was the trap that a higher being had set. It was the moment that destiny had reared its ugly head—the moment that I was shown a dream.

How could I forget? I remember. I remember now. No matter how much of a coincidence it may have been, the person who started everything off was...

"It was me..."

It was me. I did that. It'd been my only contribution. Even if I hadn't been able to do anything else, I'd at least done that.

"Heh heh heh. Just like with me!" Isana said, happy for some reason. "In that case, I got rather close. If I'd met you before Yume-san did, then perhaps we would have dated."

I forced down whatever emotions were trying to come out. This entire time I'd thought I had failed. That entire year and a half had become a forlorn failure in my mind. I'd thought my stupid overpossessiveness ruined the courage you mustered up to confess, your growth, and our happiness.

But without those few words I'd said to you, none of that would've happened. I'd probably never have come to this school or met Isana. We'd probably have become stepsiblings without really knowing each other. The reason things didn't turn out like that—the only reason that I was able to have this warm conversation with a friend, to remember your side profile, to be so happy beyond my wildest belief—was all because I spoke to you.

That was the one thing that even I'd been able to do. I fought back the feelings welling up inside me while looking through the fence.

There were so many people down there, it was impossible to tell who was who, but even so, I found the side profile of the person I knew better than anyone in this world.

“Isana...” I could only say this because she was my best friend. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“Heh heh. I look forward to it!”

And with that, I left the roof. I wasn’t going there to tell *her* something I couldn’t have said before. This time, I was going to tell her something I needed to.

Yume Irido

The flames that had been so large not too long ago were beginning to die down, signaling the end of both the cultural festival and the past few weeks we’d spent preparing for it. *Huh, this might be the first time I worked on and completed a job as big and important as this.* I started to feel more relaxed after thinking that.

It was still too early for me to loosen up and feel accomplished, though. Sure, the plan for the rest of the day was to keep the party going at a different venue, but technically, we weren’t done here yet. We still had to clean everything up.

I needed to refocus myself. All I was accomplishing by staying here was freezing my butt off. I needed to get moving so I wasn’t late to meet up with the rest of the group. But suddenly, I heard footsteps that slowly approached before stopping right next to me. Then, I felt someone sit on the bench next to me, so close that we were almost touching.

He moved his hand closer to mine as if to fill that space. I followed suit and moved mine next to his. If we continued, our hands would be on top of each other. But all I felt was the cold surface of the bench. *We’re always keeping ourselves at this distance, aren’t we? It’ll probably always be like this.* And then...the tips of our pinkies touched—just a little. It wasn’t enough to feel the warmth from his body, but still, we were *touching*. And neither of us retreated. We kept our pinkies just like that.

“You sure took your time. The fire’s almost out,” I said.

“What’s fun about watching a stupid fire? I’m only here because...I have an assignment to complete,” he said in his usual curt tone.

Most likely it was the mask he used when talking to me. If my guess was right though, he wasn’t doing a great job at maintaining it.

“Thanks,” he said clearly.

Usually that wasn’t a word he’d ever genuinely say to me. “For...what?”

“For all sorts of things. You’ve been considerate to me during our festival committee work and at home too. Also...Yuni-san told me to

thank you directly.”

“Mom did?”

“Yeah, when you took care of me when I was sick, she told me to thank *you*, not her.”

I blinked a little in a daze before reflexively turning to look at him. His side profile was bathed in the shade of the darkening night sky.

“Aren’t you kinda...a month late?”

“So?”

“You really didn’t want to thank me *that* badly?”

It’s just one word. Six letters. How hard could it have been? Why did it take so much mental preparation?

I moved on to another topic. “Didn’t you hate how pushy I was, trying to get you to interact with the committee members?”

“I’m ignoring the results and focusing on the efforts themselves. I’ve started to realize that all this time I’ve had so much trouble saying that one word.”

Thinking about it differently, this was a word that he’d spent an entire month trying to find the right time to say. *With that in mind, I guess I should be happy that he came here with the determination to thank me.*

“I should thank *you*. You helped me a lot on the committee, *and* you helped me when I got sick earlier in the year too. We’re even.”

“Yeah... So that’s why from now on, I won’t put off thanking you.”

That’s when I realized something. It was only something I could’ve noticed as someone who’d seen his side profile so many times until now. His lips seemed tense. *He* was nervous.

“Is it okay if I ask something kinda selfish?” His pinky overlapped with mine ever so slightly.

“Sure. What is it?”

“After this...” He gulped and licked his dry lips before shifting his gaze slightly towards the ground and practically squeezing the next words out of his throat. “Instead of going to the party, would you come back home with me?”

Before I knew it, I was smiling, but I couldn’t put my finger on why. Regardless, I felt like this was something to be really happy about. Honestly, I probably should have been ecstatically *screaming* about it. But I wasn’t that immature. I’d grown. I pursed my lips before smiling, feigning composure.

“Oh, fine. I guess I can. Just this once, okay?”

Mizuto shortly exhaled, his tense lips loosening with relief. Then, for the first time, he looked at me and said, “Thanks...”

Today wasn’t just the day of our cultural festival. It was hard to

put a name on it, but it was a very, very special day that needed to be commemorated.



Mizuto Irido

Our shadows stretched as the headlights from cars passed by. For some reason, the road home felt different. Maybe it was because it was night, or maybe there was another reason at play. It could've been a completely ordinary phenomenon by which everything began to look new.

"There was a lot going on, but it was fun, don't you think?" Yume whispered in the same satisfied tone as if she'd eaten a filling meal. "I never ended up joining a club, but I wonder if they give the same kinda vibe—y'know, cooperating and working with others."

"No clue. All I know is that I'm dead tired."

"Yeah, you worked hard. You should go ahead and enjoy your alone time to your heart's content."

I looked at her as she giggled. The hair hanging over her temples cast a shadow across her cheek. Even though she'd spent the entire day working, I didn't see a trace of fatigue. I'd always thought that I'd been seeing her side profile from far away, but it'd just been the result of a wall that didn't even exist. But now I knew that all I had to do was reach out and she'd be right there.

Yume made a sound of surprise and looked down at her hand, which I'd taken into my own.

"Wh-What are you—"

"It's dark. Wouldn't want you to get lost."

"That's what you do when you're in a crowd!" Though she raised her voice, it didn't seem like she had any intention of letting go.

That's all it took. With just that small gesture, I was so relieved that I almost wanted to shout. *God, I'm such an annoying guy.* I couldn't believe how much of a wimp I was, but I wasn't scared anymore. I was ready to fight myself.

"Hey..." Yume called out, looking up at me curiously, while still holding my hand.

"Hm?"

"Can I ask for your advice?"

"About what?"

"Well...Kurenai-senpai asked me for a favor."

"A favor?"

"Yeah." I played it off cool while getting ready to listen to her. I could sense how much courage she'd had to work up to ask me this.

She stared at the familiar sky before saying the words that definitively proved that the two of us were different. "She wants me to join the student council."

Yeah... I was surprised by how unsurprised I was. The current

student council member lineup was ending with the cultural festival. Apparently, Kurenai-senpai had basically been training to be the next student council president when she acted as the head of the committee. In that case, it was only natural that she would be looking for potential new members in the committee. She must've determined that Yume fit the bill.

"What...do you think?" Yume asked, looking at me.

I could already see her answer in her eyes, so all I could do was give her a push. "You want to give it a shot, don't you?"

Yume paused. "Yeah."

"Then go for it. What's there to think about?"

"Yeah..." she said, slowly facing forward.

"By the way...what if she wanted you to join too?"

"I'd refuse. Not my style."

The biggest problem was that Kurenai-senpai would be there. She might have been hiding it well, but she was definitely the same type of person as Isana and I. I doubted she wanted someone the same as her to take over.

"I see..." she said, practically sighing.

It made me kinda happy. This might've all been in my head, but I couldn't help but feel that Yume worried about the same sort of stuff as I did.

That's why I could continue squeezing her hand and say what I did next. "Are you gonna be okay all by yourself?" I asked, smiling at her in the same kind of teasing way that she'd subjected me to ever since the fireworks.

Yume glanced at me, her lips turning to a frown as if she were pouting. "Don't treat me like a kid! I'll admit that there was a learning curve for the festival committee, but it was my first time handling anything like that. I'll be fine."

"Really? Well, I hope so."

"I'll be fine!" she reiterated.

Yeah, you'll be fine. Everything was gonna be fine. After all, I knew that I could always reach out to you. I knew that if I squeezed your hand, you'd squeeze it back. Even if our thinking, lifestyle, and perception changed—even if we became entirely different people and went down completely different paths in life, I wasn't going to let go of your hand. *I don't want to.*

Afterword

As much as I'd like to believe that year after year, the world has a better understanding of what it means to be different—in other words, diversity—that doesn't necessarily seem to be the case. No matter how much time passes, people still write off being shy as a simple quirk. It really feels like the general sentiment is that shyness is simply one's lack of communication ability.

I mean, true, shy people *are* lacking in that manner. This sort of classification may be inevitable due to society being set up in a way such that, more often than not, it's difficult for anything to get done if you're a poor communicator. Even as a writer—a job that seems *least* likely to require any communicative abilities—I still need to know proper email etiquette.

In that regard, it's true that it's easier to have some kind of ability to communicate whether you're shy or not. But ultimately, it's just a matter of skill, of ability maturation, of improvement and mastery. It's like being able to spell long, complicated words or being able to use the computer. Could you *really* say that anyone who only has *one* of those skills has matured as a human?

So then, what *is* growth? In fiction, it's usually classified as getting stronger or making friends; however, that is purely for entertainment purposes. Of course, there are people, like Yume, who would feel satisfaction from consuming those kinds of stories, and those who wouldn't, like Mizuto. This is the exact problem that this volume sought to explore.

The word “ideal,” which came up a lot in this volume, is basically what lies at the end of “growth.” After all, an ideal is the image of yourself that you want to eventually reach. But what happens if it clashes with your partner's ideal? Maybe you wouldn't think too much of it at first, but somewhere down the line, it'll create a divide. It's only natural since your logic will be completely different. You won't be on the same page when it comes to what's right and what's wrong.

My job this time around was to equip Mizuto with the courage and desire to try and overcome the differences between him and Yume. Instead of *me* destroying his jaded, entrenched self-consciousness and forcing him to change, I needed him to recognize his flaws on his own.

This wasn't about making him stronger or increasing his friend

count. I think you might understand that it's more about having him accept who he is and having him affirm instead of reject who he used to be. Ultimately, though, the desire to make someone your own is something difficult to express if you don't have a high opinion of yourself.

In the end, this volume wound up being another great challenge, but I've overcome it and can move on to the next volume, which'll dive right into the mutual one-sided love arc. Oh, did you think that's how the story already was? Didn't you know that they mutually hated each other from the start of Volume 1?

Thanks so much to the illustrator, TakayaKi; Rei Kusakabe, who's in charge of the manga; my editor at Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko; and everyone else who helped on this book. I know I've been really cutting it close with my deadlines, and I'd truly like to get around to fixing that.

So anyway, this has been Kyosuke Kamishiro's *My Stepmom's Daughter is My Ex* Volume 6: *The Six Words I Couldn't Say*. The remaining student council members haven't been decided yet!



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"The six things I couldn't say"





Kogure Kawanami
He watches over the relationship between Yume and Mizuto. A self-proclaimed "Romance ROM Expert."

"Yeah, there are lots of perverts into shrimps like you out there."

"Well, this is the cultural festival. I might get hit on."

Akatsuki Minami
Childhood friend and ex of Kawanami. Loves teasing him by playing fast and loose with his love allergy.

"Wh- What do you think? Does this attire suit me?"

Isana Higashira
A loner light novel enthusiast. Rejected by Mizuto but still has feelings for him.

Mizuto Irido
Yume's ex and stepbrother. Weirdly soft on Isana, perhaps because she's his best friend.

"Can I get changed already?"

"It looks too good on him! I can't keep a straight face!"

Yume Irido
Mizuto's ex and stepsister. A beautiful honor student who succeeded at her high school entrance exam.



"Be
seated.
We will
begin the
meeting
now."

Joji Haba

A second year and treasurer of the student council. Seems to have caught Suzuri's interest.

Her voice, serene and beautiful as a bell, rang across the entire room, practically commanding any students who were still standing to immediately sit like soldiers receiving orders. She smiled at them as if to praise them for their obedience before speaking once again.

Suzuri Kurenai

A second year who is both vice president of the student council and head of the cultural festival committee. Lauded at school as a genius.

Author
Kyosuke
Kamishiro

Illustrator
Takayaki



6

My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"The Six Things I Couldn't Say"



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My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex: Volume 6
by Kyosuke Kamishiro

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